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## A reverse myth or remarks on a *Priape*, a graphic novel by Nicolas Presl

**Abstract:** In *Priape*, his wordless, black-and-white debut graphic novel published of 2006 (in Poland published by Lokator in 2015) Nicolas Presl looks at the myth of a lesser known deity, weaving his own, surprising version of the story, one which is made up of motifs not connected with Priapus. Little is known of Priapus; he was the son of Aphrodite and Dionysus (or Adonis), we also know him from some slightly obscene poems from the collection *Priapea*, which highlight his physical appearance, much as ancient art does. Presl's graphic novel, with its reverse elements of myths about Oedipus and Orestes and in which Priapus's physical appearance is not stressed at all, is actually a universal tale of life and death, love and loneliness, and most of all of alienation and otherness.

**Key words:** Nicolas Presl, Priapus, mythology, graphic novel, comic, reception studies

The works of Nicolas Presl, a French author of comics<sup>1</sup> created with virtually no words, thus appropriately named silent (the very few exceptions – particularly

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<sup>1</sup> About comics in general see: B. Beaty: *Komiks kontra sztuka*. Przeł. A. Kaczmarek, M. Cieślak. Warszawa 2013; W. Birek: *Z teorii i praktyki komiksu. Propozycja i obserwacje*. Poznań 2014; J. Szyłak: *Komiks w kulturze ikonicznej XX wieku: wstęp do poetyki komiksu*. Gdańsk 1999; Idem: *Komiks*. Kraków 2000; Idem: *Poetyka komiksu: warstwa ikoniczna i językowa*. Gdańsk 2000; Idem: *Komiks: świat przerysowany*. Gdańsk 2010; K.T. Toeplitz: *Sztuka komiksu. Próba definicji nowego gatunku artystycznego*. Warszawa 1985; comics and antiquity: G. Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (eds.): *Classics and Comics*. Oxford 2011; F. Carlà (ed.): *Caesar, Attila und Co. Comics und die Antike*. Darmstadt 2014; G. Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (eds.): *Son of Classics and Comics*. Oxford 2015.

interesting for classical philologists – will be discussed later), have been known in Poland for just a few years thanks to Lokator, a Cracow-based publishing house. His debut of ten years ago – *Priape* – came out in January 2016. And it had been a late debut, as the author, born in 1976, was 30 at the time. The Polish edition is the fourth volume of the so-called ‘Melancholy Series’ of Lokator, after *Fabrica* (Lokator 2013, Atrabile 2009), *Divine Colonie* (Lokator 2013, Atrabile 2008), and *Le fils de l’ours père* (Lokator 2014, Atrabile 2010). This last was the first to be written but was at first rejected by the publishers, only to be accepted four years later. More importantly, *Priape* is not the only antique-themed graphic novel – Atrabile, a Geneva-based publishing house specializing in comics, brought out *L’Hydrie* in 2011. Presl is also the author of two more works published by the same house: *Heureux qui comme* (2012) and *Orientalisme* (2014).

Not much is known about the author himself. He was born on 23 March, 1976 in the Vendée region of France, so he turned 40 years old in 2016. He studied Arts at the University of Rennes in western France. Before he started drawing comics he had briefly worked as a stone mason; he had majored in art restoration in the Art Department at university. At present he works as an elementary school teacher, teaching Geography, History, Mathematics and Art at the Victor Hugo French elementary school, in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Presl’s work focuses on the issue of being the Other, on rejection, on looking for one’s identity. *Fabrica*, first published in Poland in 2013 (Atrabile 2009) tells the story of a totalitarian society and of the Others. These Others have six fingers, and some readers and commentators have suggested that they might symbolize Jews in Nazi times, which seems to be borne out by the characteristic style of the uniforms worn by the soldiers who chase them.

*Divine Colonie*, also published in Poland in 2013 (Atrabile 2008) is a story of imposing one’s own ideas onto Others, of the annihilation of Others – it is set in the 15th century in an African colony where a young Italian boy arrives. There are numerous literary and art references (the former mostly to Dante). It is Dante who oneirically guides our hero through various disasters from ancient times up till the 20th century, and his laurel-decorated head features prominently on the cover, occupying the front, the back and the spine.

*Le fils de l’ours père* is ‘the first full-length silent story’<sup>2</sup> as the author himself called it in an interview with Sebastian Frąckiewicz for the Lubimy Czytać website in 2013. As mentioned before, this novel, touching on the topic of searching for one’s identity, of being somewhere in-between, was initially rejected by the publishers. The main character is a young bear raised by people, whose foster father murdered his birth father. The bear lives between the two worlds, not fully accepted by people. Finally we witness a tragic confrontation between his animal id and human, university-educated superego.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://lubimyczytac.pl/aktualnosci/publicystyka/3142/ludzie-czytaja-komiksy-zbyt-szybko>

Unpublished as of yet in Poland, *L'Hydrie* of 2011 is a compilation of mythological and historical motifs. The comic consists of two parts – the first is a reference to the Trojan War and tells the story of a rivalry between two friends, of whom one, jealous of the other's success, has him killed and served up to his father at a feast. This is not so much a reference to Pelops and his attempt to cheat Zeus by serving to him his son as it is to the deed of Lycaon's sons, serving their brother Nyctimus to Zeus<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to the myth version, in which Zeus resurrects Nyctimus, turns his brothers into wolves and punishes humanity with a flood<sup>4</sup>, the killed boy in graphic novel does not rise from the dead, and the father, despite discovering the ghoulish truth, eats everything he is served. In the second part, the young hero marries his beloved but they have problems conceiving a child, in spite of fervent prayers and repeated sacrifices. *Hydria* is a vessel which in a way contains the solution to the puzzle. The end of the story pays tribute to Greek tragedies as it evokes both pity and fear in the reader, thus bringing about a true Aristotelian catharsis.

The two most recent comics, *Heureux qui comme* (2012) and *Orientalisme* (2014), are slightly different from the others presented here in terms of both the plot (they are set in modern times) and the images – they are Presl's only comics so far drawn in colour, which separates them somehow from the earlier, black-and-white works.

Apart from the comics being 'silent' what further distinguishes the artist is his unique drawing style. It is very demanding on the reader; its aesthetics is close to ugliness. Such aesthetics is, however, used much more commonly and consciously than is widely realized (compare the style of Janek Koza or Maciej Sieńczyk, the finalist of the Nike award in 2013). The characters are far from attractive, and are presented naturalistically – we can see their sweaty foreheads, hairy legs, saggy breasts, the imperfections of their skin and fish-like eyes. This is what in my opinion infuses these stories with emotion. The reader is not only faced with the story but can experience it sometimes so painfully that he does not want to go back to it. And the lack of words makes one focus entirely on the drawing, go back to certain frames and take them in again. I am not even sure whether the term 'reading' is appropriate here. When Presl visited Poland two years ago and was asked if the process of absorbing his comics can be called reading, he said that he did not know. And in an interview for *Xiegarnia.pl* in 2014 he admitted that his characters resemble Greek tragic heroes<sup>5</sup> and that he himself is fascinated with Homer: 'I am [also] interested in the question of the foundation of western culture and the pedestal on which Homer stands. I highly value *Iliad* and *Odyseey* but it must be noted that what these stories are really

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<sup>3</sup> R. Graves: *Mity greckie*. Przeł. H. Krzeczkowski. Warszawa 1992, p. 332.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> <http://xiegarnia.pl/artykuly/nicolas-presl-wywiad/>

about is the extermination of the enemy, humiliation of the Other, about the cruelty inflicted on them. It seems quite interesting that that is what the myth on which our culture lies looks like. I really enjoy reading Homer, it gives me great pleasure but at the same time I realize that those fundamental stories are the stories of victories over the Other’.

The Priapus of myth was supposedly the son of the Aphrodite and Dionysus and, as Robert Graves puts it, an ugly child with enormous genitalia<sup>6</sup>. He owed this appearance to Hera, who wanted to punish Aphrodite for her loose morals. According to this version, Priapus was to be a gardener. Some other versions name Adonis as the father of Priapus<sup>7</sup>. He was also sometimes held to be impotent<sup>8</sup>. He is commonly presented with a giant phallus, as in the famous fresco in Pompei in Casa dei Vettii which dates back to 50–79 A.D. His place of birth is Lampsacus, situated on the south coast of the Hellespont. Priapus was chased away by the inhabitants of the city, more precisely by the husbands whose wives visited the god because of his attributes. The exiled Priapus was brought back following the advice of the oracle in Dodona in order to reverse the curse – an illness – cast on the men in Lampsacus. In an introduction to the Polish edition of *Priapea*, Jerzy Ciechanowicz interestingly observes that in early antiquity Priapus had been a local deity and that it was the expeditions of Alexander the Great that contributed to his popularity<sup>9</sup>. Priapus found his place around Dionysus: he became the guardian of sailors and fishermen. Supposedly he was so popular in Greece that Knesarchos wrote a comedy entitled *Priapus*. In Roman culture he came down in the world, and was demoted to a minor, countryside deity, commonly placed in the fields, orchards and gardens as a scarecrow whose task was to guard them against thieves and scare away birds. His effigies, made in wood, often portrayed a naked, bearded deity with a giant phallus painted red, holding a sickle<sup>10</sup>.

In the collection of 85 works preserved as *Priapea*, Priapus – as in a few poems of Martialis<sup>11</sup> – appears mostly as a guardian of gardens and fields, who makes indecent proposals or threatens thieves with sex and brags about how many were actually tempted by this punishment. In a mild version:

Praedictum tibi ne negare possis:  
si fur veneris, inpudicus exis<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Graves: *Mity greckie*, p. 74 (18e).

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 76 (18k).

<sup>8</sup> K. Marciniak: *Mitologia grecka i rzymska*. Warszawa–Bielsko-Biała 2010, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> J. Ciechanowicz: „Priap i Priapea”. In: *Priapea*. Przeł. J. Ciechanowicz. Warszawa 1998, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> 1, 35; 6, 16; 6, 49; 6, 72; 6, 73, 7, 91; 8, 40; 11; 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Priapea* 59.

And in a more explicit one:

Femina si furtum faciet mihi virve puerve,  
haec cunnum, caput hic praebeat, ille nates<sup>13</sup>.

Priapus was not the only phallic deity; one must not forget Hermes and the *hermai*, those statues in the form of poles with bearded heads and erections. Rome had a deity called Mutunus Tutunus, later equated with Priapus himself.

The first comics to feature Priapus was a Belgian comic book called *Epoxy* by Jean van Hamme and Paul Cuvelier, first published in 1968 and in Poland by Kubusse in 2015. Priapus was portrayed there as a stocky man with excess hair. He appeared in only eight frames, and was shown as one of Dionysus' suite.

He appeared again in April 1993 in the so-called 'Marvel universe' in the 10th volume of the series *Terror INC* drawn by Richard Pace to a story by D.G. Chichester. Altogether he appeared in seven places in three different series<sup>14</sup>, and so far as I have been able to establish, only in 1993. Marvel's Priapus is a super villain with an exuberant libido.

The third time we encounter a comic Priapus is in a manga by Mentaiko Itto, an artist born in 1984 and famous for so-called 'gay mangas' for adult readers. Among his several titles there is *Priapus*, at present consisting of three parts, each twenty-something pages long. The plot is quite simple – Zeus, fed up with all the hate, envy and violence on Earth commissions Priapus, a handsome muscular young man, to turn all living men into homosexuals in order to destroy humanity by depriving it of offspring. In every volume Priapus meets his potential target, causes the man to fall for him and then dumps him. It is worth noting here that this is not the only connection of Priapus with LGBT culture. He has been in a way adopted by gay arts and culture. A church of Priapus was set up in Montreal in the 1980s (St. Priapus church), and there is also a shop called Priape there which caters to homosexual customers. Erotic literature, including gay literature, brims with references to Priapus, as well.

In Presl's comics Priapus's sexuality is not defined – he has some homosexual experiences but he is also interested in girls. The main story is set in his teenage years, when he has only just started shaving, and he takes on the role of *eromenos*, a fact which only confirms accepting certain culture norms.

But first things first – the book starts with the birth of Priapus, a baby with curly hair and a big phallus. The terrified father who hides his face in his hands and the mother tearing up her body complete this sad vision of rejection. Priapus is abandoned on the outskirts of the city, in the middle of nowhere, where he is found by a goatherd who takes him home – quite like in the myth of Oedipus – to

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<sup>13</sup> *Priapea* 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Terror Inc*#10; *Terror Inc*#11; *Cage I*#15; *Silver Sable* #13; *Terror INC*#12; *Cage I*#16; *Silver Sable* #12.

his wife, who has just given him a son. Priapus grows up to be an ugly young man, with protruding teeth, spending most of his time alone playing with the animals and herding the pigs or looking towards the distant city. He does not get along with his foster brother, whom he might have fancied in a way (this may be concluded from a scene with a bull), and who stole a girl from him (a girl he met in the town while selling a pig). Possibly in a state of a shock after witnessing his brother having sex with this girl, Priapus kills all the pigs he had been tending and sets out for the city. There he meets a young man who offers to put him up and takes him to meet some philosophers. While Priapus grows more and more enchanted with the city, his brother enrolls in the Roman army. Then Priapus meets an older man and takes on the role of *eromenos*<sup>15</sup>. The older man (*erastes*), seduces him at a feast and they spend the night together. The seduction is shown on a page which is divided into 12 frames and in an almost film-like manner presents their exchange of looks. It is the repetition of the exchange between Priapus and the girl he had met in town. The final frames are particularly interesting. They feature a figure with a black face – in both situations the author shows in this way the one who has been rejected. In the scene with the girl it's the brother, and in the scene with the older man it's the younger one who put Priapus up.

When showing further love encounters Presl avoids explicit representation; the sex scene is shown symbolically. *Erastes* turns into a bull (much like previously the foster brother in the river scene), while Priapus turns into a lamb. And if we want to interpret the symbolism of this scene we learn that the bull signifies fertility and strength<sup>16</sup> whereas the lamb – common in ancient and Christian symbolism – stands for chastity, innocence and submissiveness<sup>17</sup>. On the one hand we see the innocence of Priapus and on the other, we may speculate that taking the submissive role of the *eromenos* may derive from the impotence associated with Priapus. Interestingly, the sex scenes in *L'Hydrie* are shown differently; they take the form of vase paintings which have real life equivalents. After a brief affair the man breaks up with Priapus, who follows him, finds out where he lives, and in his absence comes to his home and kills his wife. And here comes *anagnorisis* – an old slave recognises Priapus by his hair. The locks, cut after he was born, were kept in a beauty box. As Aristotle said in his *Poetics* “recognition is the most beautiful when it leads to adventures, such as in Oedipus”<sup>18</sup> as only such recognition will make the reader feel pity or horror. Unfortunately, the recognition proposed by Presl must be categorized as recognition by external signs, thus – according to Aristotle – ‘as the least artistic of its forms, used most commonly by the incompetent’<sup>19</sup>. It turns out that Priapus committed the premeditated murder

<sup>15</sup> K.J. Dover: *Homoseksualizm grecki*. Przeł. J. Margański. Kraków 2004, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> W. Kopaliński: *Słownik symboli*. Warszawa 1990, pp. 37–38.

<sup>17</sup> J-E. Cirlot: *Słownik symboli*. Przeł. I. Kania. Kraków 2006, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Arist. *Poet.* 1452a.

<sup>19</sup> Arist. *Poet.* 1454b.

of his own mother, unaware who she was. It is because of this premeditation and revenge that he is closer to Orestes than he is to Oedipus, although the latter also supposedly killed his own father unknowingly. Priapus could be then Oedipus *au rebours*, the reverse Oedipus – in a relationship with his father, killing his mother. He is arrested over the corpse of his lover's wife (not yet known to be his mother) by his foster brother who is now a Roman legionary. In the scene when Priapus finds out his true identity we can see him on a theatre stage, rejected by his birth parents and stoned by his foster family. Meanwhile, the father commits suicide by cutting his throat and the soldier brother gouges Priapus's eyes out. This also evokes the myth of Oedipus, who, however, took his own eyes out. This bloody scene, in which the unkilld despair, even howl, bathed in the blood of the murdered, is not the final ending of the novel. The last frames show the blind Priapus sitting on a bench under a tree, begging, tucked together with his minder. Priapus seen with a guide is reminiscent of a scene from *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles, which has often been painted<sup>20</sup>, where the hero, already blind, is being guided by his daughter Antigone. The surroundings of Priapus drawn in those final frames are almost idyllic – we can see two men in pastoral scenery, and seemingly happy. So Presl breaks the tragedy, finally uniting the lovers, which forms a kind of happy ending characteristic for Roman comedy. We may also be dealing here with a reference to the *vita contemplativa*, which the blind Priapus may have to lead of necessity.

So Presl selects individual motifs from the myths and ancient heritage and changes their meaning in the established cause-and-effect cycle, which make up part of his puzzle. Oedipus and Orestes are canonic figures in Greek tragedy. What Presl took from the story of Oedipus was the relationship with one's parent, the gouging out of the eyes – albeit not with one's own hands – the recognition, however, the killing of one's mother as a premeditated act of revenge is more reminiscent of Orestes than Oedipus, although the matricide here is not the act of revenge for killing the father but only an act committed out of jealousy, anger, a crime of passion (much like his slaughtering of the pigs before he escapes from his foster parents).

Finally I would like to mention two details – the text in Presl's comics and the presentation of the Roman army. As was said above, Presl's comics are silent; they do not use any words. However, words are immensely important for the author – the words that appear in books. There are several occurrences of these: in *Fabrica* the main character is reading Ovid, in *Le fils de l'ours père* the words come out of books, and in *Priape* Priapus dives into words; through them he sees the man with whom he is connected by fate. This plunge into the text is also a plunge into his-

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. José Ribelles (ca. 1800); Johan Peter Krafft (1809); C.W. Eckersberg (1812); Aleksander Kokular (1825–1828); Antoni Brodowski (1828); Per Gabriel Wickenberg (1833); Charles Jalabert (1842); Hanus Knoechl (1883); Franz Dietrich, Emil Teschendorff, Charles Francois Jalabert, Camille Felix Bellanger, Charles Thévenin.



tory – the history of the great old Greece fighting with Persians. The philosopher tells a story from the 7th book of Herodotus's *History*, from *Polyhymnia*, regarding first Darius's and then Xerxes's invasions of Greece. In the comics the story begins with Darius's sons fighting for the throne and Xerxes becoming the king. It ends with the fleet leaving the Hellespont and the army marching through Chersonesus. The Greek text, initially flowing from the mouth of the philosopher and taking up most of the frame, then 'pushes out', filling the contours of the drawn characters and forming a sort of intriguing jigsaw puzzle, only to end with a fragment of beginning of lines of the proper text. The storyteller resembles both Herodotus and Socrates. He is a very important figure in the book since characters with round, not fish-like eyes forecast important changes in Presl's graphic novels.

In *Priape* we see Roman legionnaires wearing helmets that are a variation on the Imperial Gallic style or Imperial Italic, both dating from the 1st century AD<sup>21</sup>. We also know that Priapus supposedly came from Lampsacus situated in Asia Minor near the Hellespont. In *L'Hydrie*, where there are stories connected with the Trojan War, the soldiers naturally wear Corinthian helmets – this difference suggests that in *Priape* the author drew the soldiers in Roman armour on purpose and that it is not only a mere symbol of an ancient soldier, like the one in Corinthian armour in *Divine Colonie*. Besides this there are no other clues that the story we are reading is set in Roman times. Columns in the temples are drawn in Doric order, the earliest one to evolve and developed in the Peloponnese, the area of Magna Graecia and Sicily. As Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka observes: 'it settled canonically in the early archaic period'<sup>22</sup>. The coast of Asia Minor saw rather the development of the Ionic order, which in the comics can be seen in one of the columns with the statue of a male with a spear (there is also a clothed Athena carrying a spear, standing in another place) and in one of the temples. A *kouros* which is shown in one frame is rather archaic in style and resembles the so-called 'kouros of New York' from about 600–590 BC<sup>23</sup>, with clearly defined characteristic hair that looks like pearls on a string, a bent elbow aligned with the navel, and the right leg put slightly back. Unfortunately the drawing does not show the 'archaic smile' or the band with Heracles tie. What might this Roman element in the Greek setting of archaic *kouroi* and stories taken from Herodotus mean? The mixture of Greek and Roman elements could signify the universal nature of the story, which might have happened and might still happen anywhere.

This comics story, with the reversed elements of Oedipus and Orestes myths, by stressing Priapus's humanity rather than his divine origin and physical attributes, makes us realize that we are reading a universal, although still individual, story. It is a story of life, death, love and loneliness and most of all of alienation

<sup>21</sup> Z. Żygulski jun.: *Broń starożytna*. Warszawa 1998, passim.

<sup>22</sup> E. Papuci-Władyka: *Sztuka starożytnej Grecji*. Warszawa–Kraków 2001, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 127.

and otherness. This alienation and otherness so characteristic of Presl's work is what joins the mythological image of Priapus and its 21st century version, bringing them together despite obvious discrepancies. Priapus becomes a metaphor of the other, the symbol of alienation, more valid now, in the lonely modern world, than it was in ancient times. As Grzegorz Jankowicz states in a brief blurb on the cover of the Polish edition of the book, such interpretation of an ancient myth has never before been so in touch with our experience. I cannot agree more.