



# Neil Gaiman's Use of Antiquity in Television Series: *American Gods* and *Calliope*

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By nature and physical necessity, audiovisual series are the result of collective efforts, and yet some bear an unmistakable imprint of a single author, as exemplified by two recent mesmerizing shows, Starz's 2017–2021 prematurely canceled *American Gods* and Netflix's *The Sandman* launched in 2022 and still ongoing. The history of the development and production of the two shows illustrates the precarious nature of endeavors in the entertainment industry affected by financial pressures, ratings, labor disputes, and artistic or creative differences. Both series originated from Neil Gaiman's literary successes of some decades ago: the graphic novel *The Sandman*, published in seventy-five installments by DC Comics from 1989 to 1996, and the 2001 "regular" novel *American Gods*, which in 2002 won Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel, as well as Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel.<sup>1</sup>

Even though *The Sandman*'s publication predates *American Gods*, its rebirth as an audiovisual series was aired after the adaptation of the 2001 fantasy novel completed its run on Starz. *The Sandman* spent decades in development hell as a film project, and finally, in 2019, emerged as a Netflix series, with season one filmed in 2020–2021 and streamed in 2022. In 2011, *American Gods* was initially considered for adaptation by HBO; when the giant pay television network abandoned the project in 2014, it was taken over by Starz and premiered in 2017. The show was canceled mainly because of dwindling ratings after three seasons in 2021, frustrating Gaiman's plans to run it for two more. The

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1 See the websites of Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards for the year 2002.

Covid-19 pandemic caused a year and a half break between season 2 and 3 and compared to season 1, the ratings fell by 65%.<sup>2</sup>

The announced but delayed continuation of Netflix's *The Sandman* will not air before early 2025. Still, the already circulating leaks indicate the participation of more Greek mythological figures, in addition to Oneiros and Calliope, also their son Orpheus, his wife Eurydice, Persephone, the goddess of the Underworld, and at least two Maenads. Gaiman mentions his childhood fascination with Norse gods in his "Reflections on Myths,"<sup>3</sup> which found its obvious development in his 2017 book entirely dedicated to Norse mythology, which was not only present in *American Gods* but is expected to work its magic in *The Sandman* as well through the presence of Odin, Thor, and Loki.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, nothing indicates the potential appearance of an ancient historical figure from the 30th installment of *The Sandman*, entitled *August* and featuring C. Iulius Caesar Octavianus Augustus and Lycius, an unusual actor of very short stature but *vocis immensae* mentioned by Suetonius in *Divi Augusti vita* 43.3.<sup>5</sup> The audiovisual *Sandman* seems to limit the classical inspirations to mythology, like Starz's *American Gods*, where the Herodotean leitmotif, "refrain from calling him fortunate before he dies; call him lucky," which is important in the novel,<sup>6</sup> is abandoned.

### *American Gods*

In keeping with the chronology of audiovisual adaptations of the two books, one might begin reflecting on Gaiman's use of antiquity with *American Gods*,<sup>7</sup> the show that first reached the small screen.

- 2 See Lesley Goldberg, "American Gods Cancelled at Starz," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 29 (2021), available online.
- 3 See "Reflections on Myth (with Digressions into Gardening, Comics and Fairy Tales)," *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 31 (Winter 1999): 75.
- 4 See, for instance, "The Sandman Season 2: Here's what we know so far about cast, release date, streaming platform and more," *India Times* (October 31, 2023), available online. For extensive speculations on the content and casting of *The Sandman*'s continuation, see McMillan, Malcolm. "The Sandman season 2 – everything we know so far," *Tom's Guide* (October 27, 2023), available online.
- 5 See Anise K. Strong's excellent discussion of *August* in *A Dream of Augustus*, 173–82.
- 6 Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.32.7: "But refrain from calling him fortunate before he dies; call him lucky." Translated by Alfred Denis Godley.
- 7 See the entry on the audiovisual series in *Chronological Table* and a discussion in ch. 5 in Olechowska, 'This is the Song That Never Ends' [forthcoming].

The author himself spoke of the impact of Herodotus' *Histories* on the novel in an often-quoted interview given after the publication of *American Gods* in 2001, where he explained how the Greek author provided the idea for the book:

[In the *Histories*,] you had a world in which the gods were written about and treated as simply part of the world. And I thought wouldn't it be a really cool thing to try and put that into the here and now? If people did come over with their gods, what are their gods doing, *how* are their gods doing? That's really where the whole thing sprang from.

He said that right after presenting his view on creative license and the use of research by fiction writers:

I do not see why every single weapon in the arsenal of the imagination can't be mine. The lovely thing about being an autodidact (as all writers to some extent are, is you learn very quickly how to teach yourself cool stuff, learn cool stuff, read cool stuff, and get the meat or something out of it. And give the impression that you know so much more about it than you really do).<sup>8</sup>

Shadow Moon, the endearingly naive and honorable protagonist of *American Gods*, reads the *Histories* during his stay in prison, strongly recommended to him by his non-random cellmate, Low Key Lyesmith (Loki). Herodotus is mentioned eleven times in the novel; the maxim "call no man happy until he is dead," quoted by Herodotus allegedly according to Solon's story of his encounter with Croesus, returns three times as a misleading leitmotif. Debbie Felton discussed Gaiman's use of the maxim, pointing out that the adjectives Herodotus uses, ὄλβιος and εὐτυχής, may not only mean "happy" and "fortunate" but "blessed [by the gods]" and "lucky." Low Key says to Shadow at Mr. Wednesday's funeral, implying that a reversal of fortune affects gods as inevitably as men: "Call no man happy, huh, kid?"<sup>9</sup> This is part of the deception or misdirection targeting not only Shadow but also the reader and designed to hide Odin's and Loki's intricate scheme of manipulating Shadow into voluntarily risking his death

8 Dornemann and Everding, "Dreaming *American Gods*," available online. For Gaiman's view on myths, see for instance, Gaiman, "Reflections on Myth," 75-84.

9 Felton, "Herodotean Context," 1-3; Gaiman, *American Gods*, 399.

on the American version of Yggdrasil, a human sacrifice required to resurrect Odin and restore his full power.

In the 2001 interview for *Rain Taxi*, Gaiman shares his admiration for Michael Ammar, whom he calls “one of the top sleight-of-hand magicians in the world,” and describes how, during the performance, he directs the audience’s attention by twirling his wand high in the air with one hand while unobtrusively placing an object down on the table with his other hand. When all the eyes come down from watching the fascinating wand, the object magically materializes on the table. The story of the magician serves as an explanation of Gaiman’s narrative device in the novel:

There’s a lot of stuff in *American Gods* where I’m directing your attention. If the novel is working, you are looking over here while I am putting something on the stage, setting something up, so when you get two chapters on, or ten chapters on, or in one case eighteen chapters on, you’re going to go *Oh my God, I should have seen that coming*. It’s both enjoyable and frustrating. One of the nice things about doing that stuff is that next time through the book, somebody can actually enjoy watching my hand put that little thing there.<sup>10</sup>

Elizabeth Swanstrom persuasively discusses Gaiman’s device of misdirection in *Mr. Wednesday’s Game of Chance*, a chapter in the collective volume edited by Tray L. Bealer, Rachel Luria, and Wayne Yuen.<sup>11</sup> Odin and Loki entangle Shadow in a masterful “set-up so cleverly fore-grounded that it can only be seen in retrospect.”<sup>12</sup> Nothing has been left to chance by the divine Norse schemers, and their epic con to regain worshippers proceeds as planned, launched three decades earlier with Shadow’s conception as its act one. Solon’s story of Croesus and the maxim about reversal of fortune introduced at the beginning of the novel is, as Swanstrom says, “a fiendishly clever move on Gaiman’s part because it makes a sucker of Shadow and the reader both.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the true goal of Odin’s and Loki’s con is to take over the shrinking numbers of worshippers by manipulating the other gods into killing each other while their attention is misdirected toward Shadow.

10 Dorneman and Everding, “Dreaming American Gods.”

11 Bealer, Luria, and Yuen, *Neil Gaiman and Philosophy*, 2–20.

12 *Ibid.*, 10.

13 Swanstrom, “Mr. Wednesday’s Game of Chance,” 10–13.

More recently, Herodotus' role in *American Gods* has been the topic of Vanda Zajko's article in the 2020 issue of the *Classical Receptions Journal*.<sup>14</sup> The author, at the time aware of only the first season of the television series, does not ignore the show entirely but puts the emphasis on the novel and says:

Gaiman's text is an interesting case study from the perspective of classical reception because he sidelines the ancient Greek gods in the main body of his story, while simultaneously positioning the ancient historian Herodotus as a significant intertext.<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact, in Gaiman's novel, Greek gods are not so much sidelined as simply absent. In the television series, on the other hand, although only in season three, we have Demeter, goddess of the harvest, Argus Panoptes, Hera's servant and watchman of Io, slayed by Hermes and now resurrected as the god of surveillance, and a rather obnoxious character, called Technical Boy who in the finale of season three is revealed as Prometheus, "inventor" of fire, the god of innovation, constantly evolving and forgetting his previous incarnations. In season one, the Roman Vulcan, who in today's America became the god of firearms, forges a magical blade for Odin but betrays him and Shadow to the New Gods.<sup>16</sup> Odin decapitates him with the new blade and curses his worshippers. As mentioned above, there is no mention of Solon's maxim or Herodotus in the television series. Classical mythology replaced ancient history without a trace if you discount Shadow's statement that he read many books in prison, the Herodotean *Histories* among them.

Demeter was first alluded to in s03e02 *Serious Moonlight* and appeared in s03e03–e06 (*Ashes and Demons*, *The Unseen*, *Sister Rising*, and *Conscience of the King*). She constitutes an interesting case of classical reception, as Gaiman transforms the Greek goddess who suffers the loss of her child and, in her despair, lets the world go to ruin into a figure familiar and relatable to contemporary audiences: a

14 Zajko, "Contemporary Mythopoesis," 299–322.

15 Zajko, "Contemporary Mythopoesis," 299.

16 Zajko acknowledges Vulcan's presence in s01e6 and describes him as follows: "Vulcan, an 'old god' who had been on the point of extinction, has been reinvigorated by the Americans' love for firearms. Presiding over the eponymous town in Virginia dominated by the manufacture of guns, he has 'turned fire into fire-power' and is now worshipped by the bullets fired into the air by his supporters, all of whom are white and wear arm-bands which bear a close resemblance to those worn by the Nazis." Zajko, "Contemporary Mythopoesis," 308.

woman devastated by the loss of a stillborn daughter and abandoned in her grief by an irresponsible partner. In Greek mythology, things are genealogically and otherwise too complicated for today's mortals to relate to: Demeter's and Zeus' daughter, Persephone, was kidnapped by Hades, her parents' brother, who wanted to marry her and live with her in the Underworld with her father's blessing but unbeknown to her mother and naturally, without her consent.

In *American Gods*, mythological intricacies are forgotten to make room for ordinary human relationships. Demeter came to Pennsylvania in 1765, appealed to by the mother of a family of farmers struggling with failing crops. The woman used a ritual involving a corn husk puppet and a pig sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Demeter responded by bringing in miraculous crops. During the American Revolution, two Norse gods, Odin and Tyr (god of war), tried to woo her. She chose Odin even though Tyr was more honorable. They had a passionate affair, but when their daughter was stillborn, Odin abandoned his distraught lover, unable or unwilling to offer her emotional support. It was the rejected suitor, Tyr, who helped her in her hour of need.

Odin learns about Demeter's whereabouts from a postcard she sent at the occasion of Equinox to the empathetic Tyr (now a dentist). After an incident culminating in her public claim of divine status, a clueless judge committed her to a mental hospital, Haven Glen Retreat. There, she was surrounded by kind and sympathetic nurses and the trust and admiration of the other patients who made her feel worshipped. To release Demeter from the facility and convince her to join his war, Mr. Wednesday tries blackmailing the director, forges a marriage certificate, and, finally, becomes a patient himself. Demonstrating that grief may lessen with time but trust once betrayed may never recover, Demeter, who is no longer affected by Odin's manipulative charm, lets herself be persuaded to return to the world, leaves the hospital, but refuses to join Odin and disappears. Her lack of confidence in him and her unequivocal departure profoundly affect Odin, who regrets his previous unscrupulous behavior and is painfully reminded of the joy they shared in the past.

The two other mythological Greeks played only marginal roles. They were presumably selected to fit specific segments of modern American reality: Argus Panoptes embodies the ubiquitous and

17 Magic rituals to call upon divine beings figured prominently also in the graphic novel *The Sandman* and its audiovisual adaptation, where both the Lord of Dreams and Calliope were captured and imprisoned by mortals using ancient enchantments allegedly found in an old grimoire.

constant surveillance, omnipresent not only in fictional spy series but also in real life, and Prometheus / Technical Boy, representing the unending stream of innovations. The Roman god Vulcan appears in the first season in a small town where firearms are manufactured without much concern for employees' safety, as an adequate modernization of the factory would cost more than settling an occasional fatal accident. He estimates that some such occurrences qualify as an acceptable price to ensure the town's and his own continued prosperity. American Vulcan is a ruthless figure with few redeeming features; he personifies all that is wrong with an excessive fascination with firearms and allows greed to trump concerns for human safety. In a scene of unalloyed horror, his decapitated body dissolves in a vat of molten metal and is urinated upon by Odin. The extreme brutality occasionally present in Norse mythology and reflected in the series provides an outlet for a severely critical view of an ideology advocating against gun control.

### *Calliope*

On August 12, 2022, twelve days after the release of season 1, the Netflix series *The Sandman* streamed a bonus episode containing two separate stories only indirectly connected to the main plot.<sup>18</sup> The first story is an animation, *Dream of a Thousand Cats*, and the second is a live-action fantasy, *Calliope*.<sup>19</sup>

The television series is an adaptation of Neil Gaiman's comic books from the 1990s<sup>20</sup> with Morpheus, Lord of Dreams, as the leading character. The title comes from European folklore and a comic book predating World War II, Gardner Fox's and Bert Christman's 1939 *The Sandman*, published by DC Comics. In the Gaiman's series, the Lord of Dreams is seized due to a failed attempt to capture Death by a father distraught by the loss of his son, during World War I, in 1916. Morpheus is then imprisoned to prevent him from undertaking any potential punitive action. Over one hundred years later, he escapes and travels between various realms to find his tools of power, stolen during his captivity, and to restore his kingdom of Dreams and Nightmares, the

18 For the narrative connections between *The Sandman* and Joseph Campbell, see Rauch, "The Sandman" and Joseph Campbell. For details of the episode, see Pszczolińska's entry on *Sandman* SO1E11, "Calliope by Neil Gaiman, Louise Hooper," for Our Mythical Childhood Survey, available online.

19 *Sandman* SO1E11: *Dream of a Thousand Cats* / *Calliope* was directed by Hisko Hulsing and Louise Hooper.

20 Gaiman, Jones, and Jones, *The Sandman* 17: *Dream Country*.

Dreaming. It is a place where sleeping mortals can experience freedom and adventure, facing fears and fantasies in dreams and nightmares the king of dreams creates and controls.<sup>21</sup> He meets many mythical, legendary, or fantastic characters of various origins. Although his Greek or Roman roots are not explicitly highlighted in the series (the viewer hears the name Morpheus in episode two), he displays many of his ancient features.

In episode eleven, *Calliope*, the Sandman is called by his Homeric name, Oneiros,<sup>22</sup> and also presented as Morpheus, the one “whom the Romans called the shaper of the form,” the name deriving from μορφή, “form, shape.” The series also retains some of Oneiros’ siblings, as mentioned by Hesiod;<sup>23</sup> here, they are called the Endless. According to Gaiman, the Endless are children of Night and Time, embodiments of natural forces, though Hesiod provides only the mother’s name.<sup>24</sup> The other Endless featured in season one are Destiny (Μόρος), Death (Θάνατος), Desire, and Despair (Οιζύς). By turning a Greek god into an Endless, Gaiman develops the character as more enduring than old gods who died because worshippers abandoned them. One of the Fates explains to Calliope, who asks them for help: “Many gods have died, my daughter. Only the Endless never fade.”<sup>25</sup> Dream is also explicitly described as “not a god, more than a god. And are men not governed by their dreams?”<sup>26</sup> This way, the audience is given a plausible reason why Dream or Death are still present and relevant in the contemporary world.

Other mythical characters in the series are the already mentioned Fates, who appear four times; they also play the role of oracles and use riddles while answering questions. According to Hesiod, they were daughters of Nyx<sup>27</sup> and thus Oneiros’ half sisters; however, this fact is not mentioned in the series. Morpheus calls the Fates “the Three-Who-Are-One, the-One-Who-Is-Three, the Hecate”<sup>28</sup> and never invokes the family connection. When asked to reveal their name in episode seven,<sup>29</sup> they answer: “Be satisfied with the trinity

21 *Sandman* S01E01: *Sleep of the Just*, directed by Mike Barker.

22 See Homer, *Iliad* 2.56, *Odyssey* 14.495.

23 Hesiod, *Theogony* 211–25.

24 *Ibid.* 213: οὐ τινι κοιμηθεῖσα θεὰ τέκε Νύξ ἐρεβεννή (“gloomy Night bore ... although she had slept with none of the gods”), translation by Glenn W. Most.

25 *Sandman* S01E11.

26 *Sandman* S01E01.

27 Hesiod, *Theogony* 217.

28 *Sandman* S01E02: *Imperfect Hosts*, directed by Jamie Childs.

29 *Sandman* S01E07: *The Doll’s House*, directed by Andrés Baiz.



you have, love. You wouldn't want to meet us as the Kindly Ones," i.e., they may assume the function of Eumenides / Erinyes. Their triple identity becomes clearer at their last appearance in the series. Calliope summons them, begging on her knees: "Gracious ladies, mother of the Camenae, hear my prayer. ... Ladies of meditation, remembrance and song, hearken to me."<sup>30</sup> In the graphic novel, she directly uses the names "Melete, Mneme, Aiode,"<sup>31</sup> identifying them with elder Muses and with her mother, Mnemosyne.

The episode *Calliope*, released as the first season's post-finale, casts the Muse as the protagonist. She is held captive by a mortal man. It parallels the imprisonment of Morpheus at the beginning of the series. Her captor, a writer called Erasmus Fry, explains:

I was 27, visiting Mount Helicon. Researching yet another novel I was sure to abandon. This one steeped in Greek mythology. And while I was there, I discovered a trove of ancient texts about the Muses and how to control them using *moly*, sorcerer's garlic, and certain lost rituals. The hardest part was getting her back to England.<sup>32</sup>

*Moly*, a mysterious magical plant powerful against sorcery, is mentioned in the *Odyssey*.<sup>33</sup> It has characteristic milk-white flowers and black roots that mortal men may find hard to pull out. Theophrastus in *The Story of Plants* discussed it as a variety of Allium, ornamental garlic.<sup>34</sup> Neil Gaiman reuses the motif of *moly* as part of an ancient ritual powerful enough to bind a goddess. Fry calls it "sorcerer's garlic," which suggests that it is the plant listed by Theophrastus. Homer describes it as an herb that protects Odysseus from the magic of Circe. Here, *moly* is used against the goddess, not to protect but to enslave. Another part of the binding enchantment, parallel to the rite performed to capture Morpheus, allowed Fry to deprive Calliope of her ancient tool of power by burning her scroll. Morpheus was robbed

30 *Sandman* ΣΟΙΕ11; for the κλύτε, Μοῖραι formula and its comparison to the habitual language of prayers see Bowra, "A Prayer to the Fates," 234.

31 According to Pausanias, Melete, Mneme, and Aoide were the three from Boeotia, replaced later with the nine Muses established by Pierus, a Macedonian, after whom the mountain was named. Cf. *Description of Greece* 9.29.2–3: οἱ δὲ τοῦ Ἀλωέως παῖδες ἀριθμόν τε Μούσας ἐνόμισαν εἶναι τρεῖς καὶ ὀνόματα αὐταῖς ἔθεντο Μελέτην καὶ Μνήμην καὶ Ἀοιδήν. See also Vox, "Esiodo fra Beozia e Pieria," 321–25.

32 *Calliope* ΣΟΙΕ11: *The Sandman*.

33 Homer, *Od.* 10.302–306.

34 Theophrastus, *Hist. plant.* 9.15.7.

of his three tools of power and imprisoned naked in a magic circular cage; Calliope, without her scroll, naked (graphic novel) or barely dressed (serial), was held for many years locked up in a basement, where Fry violated her whenever he wished to obtain inspiration. While not glossed over, acts of merciless brutality against the Muse are more explicit in the literary source than in the television series. Most probably because of the difference in audiovisual aesthetics and the wider spectrum of potential viewers targeted by television.

As an old man, he trades the Muse for a bezoar brought to him by Richard Madoc, another writer unable to find new ideas. Fry confesses to Richard:

They say one ought to woo her kind. But I must say I found force most efficacious.<sup>35</sup>

He encourages Richard not to pity Calliope or be kind to her, hoping to be rewarded by inspiration because she is not human and was

created for this. This is her purpose, to inspire men like us.<sup>36</sup>

The character of Calliope is intensely sexualized (more so in the graphic novel, where she is imprisoned naked; in the TV series, she is barefoot and wears a thin nightgown). When Erasmus enters the basement with Richard, she asks:

Am I now to perform for your amusement? Is this man to be our audience?<sup>37</sup>

A harsh red light sends an alarm signal to the viewer. The “performance” she is thinking about is not declaiming hexameters from the *Iliad*.

At first, the new owner considers unbinding the Muse. He gives her a coat to cover the nightgown and locks her in a bedroom, not in a basement; he tries to woo her with presents but still holds her captive. In fact, contrary to his character in the graphic novel, Madoc in *Calliope* is not from the outset an unredeemable villain, a ruthless, determined rapist, but rather a greedy, ambitious man who wants, at first, to avoid the violence recommended by Fry. Only pushed to the limit by his fear of failure, his persisting writer’s block, and the

35 *Sandman*, SO1E11.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

pressure of the publisher's nine-month overdue deadline, he abandons his restraint and proceeds to abuse the Muse as Fry did before him, demonstrating that even men aspiring to some degree of decency may in time turn into monsters given strong enough incentives.

Contrary to the brutal scene of rape included in the graphic novel, the sexual assault is not shown in the television series. The scene opens with Richard staring at a blank computer screen and unsure what to write. Then, all worked up, he gets up and knocks on the Muse's door. In the next shot, we see him again at his computer, writing in a "manic fit," with a bloody fingernail scratch on his cheek. The scene leaves no doubt as to what happened: he used violence to get what he wanted, but she fought him in a desperate act of defiance.

Terrified and distraught, Calliope summons the Fates, hoping they can release her, but it turns out that the bonding ritual prevents them from any action:

There are few of the old powers who are willing or able to meddle in mortal affairs in these days, Calliope. Many gods have died, my daughter. Only The Endless never fade. And even they have been having a difficult time of late.<sup>38</sup>

They suggest Morpheus as Calliope's former husband and father of her son. Unfortunately, he is also magically imprisoned by mortals. On the day Calliope realizes that Oneiros is free, she calls him by writing down his name even though her master confidently and arrogantly claims:

You're mine. By law. The God of Dreams can't save you.<sup>39</sup>

Despite their complicated past, Dream, who, since the publication of the graphic novel, in parallel with ongoing social developments, acquired, in comparison with his original character, more emotional sensitivity, answers her call and helps Calliope regain her freedom. Dream was not alone in having to evolve during the three decades since Gaiman published *Calliope* as the 17th installment of *The Sandman*. The story of a captured and abused Muse, an immortal goddess of high status, prestige, and power, brought to the fore the painful issue of violence against women, specifically of the potential threat of sexual abuse from men in a position of actual or perceived authority.

38 *Sandman*, SO1E11.

39 *Ibid.*

Wide-ranging changes in mentality and societal attitudes occurred during that period. The phrase *Me Too*, applied in the context of sexual abuse in 2006, became the hashtag #*MeToo* in 2017 when it highlighted the scope of the problem and galvanized public opinion against the culture of rape in the workplace where employment dynamic may be used to facilitate and cover up abuse. When the graphic novel story of text combined with visuals was translated into sound and images of a television series, it reflected the whole spectrum of these changes.

The scene of violence precedes the summoning of the Fates. Calliope, a daughter of Zeus, calls for help and prays as an ordinary supplicant to powerful female deities she hopes can save her. She does not call Zeus but appeals to her mother, as any woman would do in her place. The Fates appear, and the scene's background looks distinctly "Arcadian." The landscape resembles a painting hanging at Erasmus Fry's house, beneath which the two writers talk about capturing the Muse. In contrast with Calliope's dark room and her skimpy nightgown, the respectable and dignified Fates wear ancient white robes and appear against an open vista of an idyllic, freshly green landscape, clear running water, and a small round temple on a hill. Unlike in episode two, where Morpheus, in a gloomy scenery, summons the clad-in-black Fates adhering to the rule of "one question, one answer,"<sup>40</sup> the omniscient Fates talk freely with Calliope, almost as equals, without riddles or ambiguities and without requiring payment. They cannot help her, but they give hopeful advice. In the scene, the viewer learns of Calliope's other family connections – Orpheus is mentioned as her son. His entire life story is condensed in a single well-turned sentence:

That boy-child who went to Hades for his lady-love and died in Thrace torn apart for his sacrilege; he had a beautiful voice too.<sup>41</sup>

Contrary to ancient sources<sup>42</sup> that attribute the great musician's paternity to Oiagros, Calliope's Thracian lover, in both the graphic novel and later in the television series, Oneiros is the father of Orpheus.

The theme of forgiveness for the acts that are far beyond current social norms, acceptance, and understanding, which, from the per-

40 *Sandman* SO1E01.

41 *Sandman* SO1E11.

42 E.g., Apollodorus 1.15, Apollonius Rhodius 1.24, Hyginus, *Fabulae* 14; for the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, see for instance, Apollodorus 1.14–15 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.1–85.

spective of the victim, are a matter of lasting horror, nightmares, and a source of persistent trauma – and in most contemporary legislations, are defined as criminal. Morpheus is understandably outraged at the writer's heinous behavior, but, being now a changed man, he relents, respecting Calliope's sentiment when she says:

What punishment could be enough? Even his death would not bring back what he has taken from me.<sup>43</sup>

As for Calliope, her divine strength of character and the dignity she preserves in the face of humiliation allows her to show clemency and wisdom; she says: "Without forgiveness, wounds will never heal."<sup>44</sup> However, the perpetrator is punished, and the punishment strikes where it would hurt a writer the most. When Morpheus, allowed only to inspire, demands Calliope's instant release, and Richard dares to beg for more ideas, the god floods his mind with such an abundance of ideas that the author, having no pen and paper, frantically tries to write them down on the walls in his blood. Finally, when Calliope is gone forever, Richard rapidly loses memory of all he has written forcibly extracting inspiration from the Muse, and has no more stories to tell.

On the other hand, without any observable outside intervention – an act of cosmic justice? – the once-famous Erasmus Fry is struck by even worse misfortune: his books are forgotten and out of print, and he ends his miserable life by taking poison. A comment immediately comes to mind: Loki telling Shadow at Odin's funeral in *American Gods* (the novel):

Call no man happy, huh, kid?<sup>45</sup>

Both despicable writers are punished where it hurts most: their once dazzling fame fades away without a trace and their names sink into oblivion.

Once free of her sixty-year-long bondage, Calliope answers Morpheus' question, "What will you do now?" saying:

I think what I must do is to try to make sure that this never happens to anyone else ever again. How? I do not know. By inspiring humanity to want better for themselves and each other. By rewriting the laws

43 *Sandman* S01E11.

44 *Sandman* S01E11.

45 Gaiman, *American Gods*, 399.

by which I was held. Laws that were written long ago in which my sisters and I had no say.<sup>46</sup>

And Morpheus, having significantly evolved since the graphic novel, replies:

I shall do the same in my realm.<sup>47</sup>

This comment does not detract from highly encouraging the viewer to watch the forthcoming second season of *The Sandman*, during which we may expect that Calliope will *one day perhaps* visit Oneiros in his Dream World, something that seemed very unlikely in 1990.

Critics are practically unanimous as to the excellence of *Calliope's* cast, enthusiastically praising performances of Tom Sturridge (Morpheus), Melisanthi Mahut (Calliope),<sup>48</sup> Arthur Darvill (Richard Madoc), and Derek Jacoby (Erasmus Fry).<sup>49</sup> While in the graphic novel, Calliope is supernaturally thin and elongated with untidy blonde curls, in the television series, she is a beautiful woman whose suffering is poignantly rendered by the brilliant performance of Melisanthi Mahut, known to the audiences as the voice of Cassandra, the *misthios* in the video game *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.<sup>50</sup> The Greek-Canadian actress is cast perfectly in the role of Calliope; she speaks English with a Greek accent, emphasizing the origin of the Muse of Epic Poetry who inspired Homer. The Greek mythological dimension of the story highlights its profoundly universal resonance, unerringly reaching and delighting today, in its renewed audiovisual form, audiences much larger than it ever did three decades ago as a less sophisticated graphic novel. Like in *American Gods*, Gaiman uses classical mythology to reflect and amplify the essential contemporary challenges facing twenty-first-century society.

46 *Sandman* SO1E11.

47 *Sandman* SO1E11.

48 For Calliope's iconography in antiquity, see Queyrel, "Les muses à l'école," 90–102.

49 See for instance online reviews by Amelia Emberwing (IGN), Rebecca Nicholson (*Guardian*), Judy Burman (*Time*), Ben Wright (XGeeks), and Melanie McFarland (*Salon*).

50 *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, published by Ubisoft in 2018.

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## ABSTRACT

*American Gods* (Starz 2017–2021) and *The Sandman* (Netflix 2022–), two highly watchable audiovisual series are adaptations of Neil Gaiman's popular novel (2001) and of his earlier comic book series (1989–1996). They are both inspired by classical and Norse mythologies and reflect the evolution of culturally and socially important themes that occurred between the publication of their literary models and the airing of the television series. Curiously, the adaptation of the novel includes more Olympic gods but glosses over the influence of Herodotus. *The Sandman*, on the other hand, in its television version, and specifically, in its first season finale episode *Calliope*, under discussion here, is much less graphic in the scenes of sexual abuse leaving the more drastic images to the imagination of the viewers but at the same time achieving an even more expressive empathy toward the suffering victim and a severe condemnation of the committed outrage.

KEYWORDS: *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman, Greek mythology, Norse mythology, reception of myths, *The Sandman*

Neil Gaiman in njegova raba antike v televizijski seriji:  
*Ameriški bogovi* in *Kaliopa*

## IZVLEČEK

*Ameriški bogovi* (Starz 2017–2021) in *Peščeni mož* (Netflix 2022–), dve izrazito gledljivi avdiovizualni seriji, sta priredbi priljubljenega romana Neila Gaimana (2001) in njegove predhodne serije stripov (1989–1996). Obe sta navdihnjeni s klasično in nordijsko mitologijo ter odražata razvoj kulturno in družbeno pomembnih tem, do katerega je prišlo med objavo njunih literarnih predlog in predvajanjem televizijskih serij. Zanimivo je, da priredba romana vključuje več olimpskih bogov, vendar zamolči vpliv Herodota. Po drugi strani je *Peščeni mož* v svoji televizijski različici, natančneje v tu obravnavani zadnji epizodi prve sezone z naslovom *Kaliopa*, v prizorih spolne zlorabe precej manj grafičen; drastičnejše podobe prepušča gledalčevi domišljiji, a hkrati doseže še bolj izrazito empatijo do trpeče žrtve in ostro obsodbo storjene nezaslišanosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *Ameriški bogovi*, Neil Gaiman, grška mitologija, nordijska mitologija, recepcija mitov, *Peščeni mož*