

Adding Caricature: Adapting Racist Imagery in *Asterix* and *Stories of the East from Herodotus*

Racist caricature of Black people should have no place in any part of popular culture, but it has been and still is a feature of some modern works of fiction inspired by the ancient world, particularly those marketed to children. This paper will consider two such works as case studies: the 2020 US edition of *Asterix and Cleopatra: Album 6* by Rene de Goscinny and M. Uderzo and the 2014 edition of Alfred J. Church's *Stories of the East from Herodotus*. These two volumes represent diametrically opposite approaches to the problem of racist caricatures in modern fiction.

Asterix remains one of the most enduringly popular works of ancient historical fiction, but its treatment of non-white characters, especially Black characters, is extremely problematic. *Asterix*'s art style derived from the Marcinelle school and uses cartoonish exaggeration to depict human figures. In the case of Black characters, the art draws on the imagery and visual conventions of racist anti-Black caricature. Such caricature was conventional (although still highly offensive) when the series premiered in 1959, when the influence of French colonial was still strong (Duval 2022). *Asterix*' Black characters are consistently depicted with large red lips and ape-like features. They are dressed in exoticizing animal skins and their speech was laden with thick accents. Except for the Pirate Lookout Baba and newer characters like the Nubian princesses in Album 37 (Ferri, and Conrad 2017), Black characters are placed in interchangeable subaltern roles, usually fanning rich Romans or performing similar menial services. The practice continued well into the twenty-first century in albums such as *Asterix and the Chariot Race* (2017). However, the series' US publisher, Papercutz, has recently announced that *Asterix* will be reissued for the US market with altered imagery that will reduce the racist artistic elements of

the comics. (Alverson and Reid 2020). The newly released *Asterix* albums have recolored the characters' lips to match the lighter skin on their palms and the bottoms of their feet.

Additionally, a new translation alters the speech of characters of C5olor to standard English.

While the change is welcome, it does little to mitigate the overall impact of the original caricatures. Additionally, the new editions lighten the skin other "attractive" racialized characters such as Cleopatra, which reinforces the colorism of contemporary beauty standards.

While *Asterix* has taken some steps to mitigate the racist aspect of its artwork, the 2014 edition of Alfred J. Church's 1881 children's book *Stories of the East from Herodotus*, published by Sandy Croft Publishing, has actually introduced new racist caricatures that were not a feature of the original volume. The cover image is a color drawing of Ramesses II attacking a group of Nubians which is based on a plaster cast currently at the British Museum that is painted to recreate a scene from the Temple at Beit el-Wali in its original colors. (Ricke, Hughes and Wente 1967). While the plaster cast restores the figures of the Nubians to have a variety of skin tones, as they do in better preserved painted carving in the temple, the book cover darkens the Nubians so that they are a uniform black, in contrast to the much lighter-skinned Pharaoh. The plaster cast leaves blank spaces wherever the original artwork is damaged past recognition, but the cover image restores the missing faces with enlarged red lips, following the same racist caricature conventions that the unaltered artwork of *Asterix* displays. As a result, the 1881 text is contextualized within a modern racist ideology which influences readers' perception of the work, and by extension, the Herodotean material that it adapts.

These two case studies demonstrate that popular works of fiction which are frequently consumed by children not only continue to enforce modern cultural connections between the ancient world and white supremacy, they also prove that such connections will continue to be a

feature of receptions of ancient world in popular children's culture as long as there is no financial incentive to alter them.

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