
THE ASTERIX SERIES: GALLIC IDENTITY IN A NUTSHELL?

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INTRODUCTION

Since its original publication in *Pilote* magazine in 1959, the *Asterix* comics series has frequently been related to the French Resistance during the Second World War.¹ In the series, a small but relentless nameless village inhabited by Gauls resists Roman occupation, which could be seen as symbolizing WWII and the Axis occupation during the war. Nicolas Rouvière, maître de conférence in literature at the Joseph-Fourier University in Grenoble, suggests that the publication of this first *Asterix* can be seen as a remembrance of Charles de Gaulle, who was the leading figure of the Resistance.² It is also worth remembering that de Gaulle's time and the political stance is called Gaullism (*gaullisme*), which further illustrates the analogy between Gauls and de Gaulle, names that both have the same meaning: French (*le Français*).³

Asterix, both the leading character of the comics and the series as a whole, personify a certain image of this Gaullism, albeit one that seems malleable. A great many of myths or suppositions have been read out of or read into the *Asterix* series: for instance, it has been said to represent left-wing politics; to represent right-wing politics; or to be Gaulliste.⁴ The journal *Le Monde* dedicated a November–December 2015 special issue (“hors-série”) to *Asterix*. The title of that issue, *Un héros, une oeuvre. Astérix l'Irréductible* inspired this forum text, which discusses the role of the *Asterix* comic series as a symbol of Gallic identity.

Asterix's main protagonists, Asterix and Obelix, and the other villagers are described in the comics as *bagarreur* (“pugnacious”), a characteristic that creates conflicts both inside and outside of the village. The series is well known in Europe and seems to fulfill reader expectations, as it attracts old and new readers from album to album. But what has made the series so enduringly successful among readers of all ages for several decades? Perhaps it is its references to historical events, though anachronistic, or to contemporary culture and politics. Or perhaps it is the conflicts and violence that seem to not cause any damage, or even its ambiguous hero Asterix and the small village's resistance to a powerful occupying force. I will briefly explore the role of each of these possibilities in the following sections.

¹ Rouvière 2015.

² Rouvière 2015, 7. Nicolas Rouvière has written several books on Asterix; see Rouvière 2006; 2008.

³ See, however, the dialogue between Louis Martineau and Charles de Gaulle about the origin of de Gaulle's name and its meaning. Available at: <http://www.dialogus2.org/GAU/degaulleetlagaule.html>.

⁴ Cf. Quillien 2015, 119; also King 2001.



BIRTH OF A GALLIC SYMBOL: THE STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITY

In 1959, writer René Goscinny and writer-artist Albert Uderzo created the adventures of a Gaul warrior, Asterix, for the newly launched magazine, *Pilote*. They wanted to create a humorous series that parodied the image of the Gauls presented in the old school books they remembered from their childhood with added elements of current social tribulations.⁵ A Gaul was described traditionally in school books as a robust man with large pants, a helmet, a braid, and a blond moustache. This description fits Vercingetorix, the heroic chieftain of the Gallic tribes, who, nevertheless, was defeated and captured by Caesar.⁶ For its part, the Gaul village seems to represent the democratic values of the Third Republic, based on secularism and school or educational values. For instance, the druid Getafix (Magigimmix in the American version) outwardly resembles the secular teachers of that time (Panoramix in the original French).⁷ Both creators had an immigrant background and had to face racism and difficulties in integrating in French society; Goscinny was Jewish, the son of a Polish father and a Ukrainian mother, and Uderzo had Italian parents. These immigrant backgrounds inspired them to create the series *Asterix* in which they could present their view of “Frenchness” (*francité*), a collective French identity that they portrayed in a sympathetic but ironic way.⁸ French editor and journalist Alain Duhamel says that the *Asterix* series also represents the whole political spectrum of French society,⁹ and thus creates a mirror image of today’s world.

Asterix is often compared to the Gallic resistance hero Vercingetorix, with the difference that the comics character always defeats the enemy, “thus giving the iconography an optimistic ‘happy ending’.”¹⁰ The figure of Asterix is drawn in stark physical contrast to a traditional hero-image; rather, he represents an anti-superstar, a small figure with a connotatively small name (the asterisk being a small typographical symbol). The small stature of Asterix, the warrior, might make the reader think about the biblical battle between David and Goliath, but if the two are in any way connected, Asterix is “a grotesque reincarnation” of David.¹¹ Obelix, the other heroic

⁵ Samuel 2011; Fottorino 2015; Rouvière 2015.

⁶ King 2001.

⁷ Rouvière 2015, 9.

⁸ Rouvière 2015, 7.

⁹ In Plougastel, 2015, 67; see also Beard 2002.

¹⁰ King 2001, 12.

¹¹ Frappat 2015, 76.



figure in the series, does not have big muscles and a trained body either, but is rather portly.¹² Thanks to a magic potion, Asterix and the villagers still manage to win all their battles, even if they appear to mess things up in each volume.¹³ This always repeating and reassuring setting seems to appeal to readers and fulfill their expectations. The character of Asterix therefore incarnates the Gauls' pride and resistance against invaders, and it gives birth to a sort of "international resistance movement" among other nations.¹⁴ The French journalist and editor Bruno Frappat suggests, however, that, in fact, Asterix does not want to conquer the Gauls or attack Rome, but instead wants only to live peacefully in his village, even if he is ready to obey his chieftain and help other nations – and even Caesar – to resist invaders or other oppressive powers.¹⁵ In my opinion, in this respect, he represents the myth of the "peaceful" warrior who wants to live in peace but is ready to fight for the right cause if necessary; and quite often it seems that there is someone who needs his help.

While Asterix and the male villagers are described as hot-tempered, the women are assigned a secondary or almost non-existent role for many volumes.¹⁶ As a result, Goscinny and Uderzo were criticized for being misogynist in the 1960s. In response, Goscinny gave two reasons for the omission of pugnacious female characters: first, one cannot render female characters ridiculous and a laughing stock ("Les femmes n'aiment pas le ridicule," he said in an interview in 1972); second, in accordance with a 1949 law that regulated publications for youth, the scriptwriter and the illustrator had to censor the series so that there was no gender mixing.¹⁷ Then, in 1965, the authors responded to their critics with their sixth volume, which included one of the most famous female figures in history: Cleopatra.¹⁸ Gradually, female characters were given more space in the stories, especially in Uderzo's work.¹⁹ The series now includes a range of female figures, from kind young girls like *Falbala* (Panacea in the English version) to *Bonemine* (Impedimenta), the

¹² Rouvière 2015.

¹³ Beard 2002.

¹⁴ Quillien 2015, 118.

¹⁵ Frappat 2015, 77; Rouvière 2015, 10.

¹⁶ It is worth keeping in mind that in France women only got the right to vote in 1945. Even today, when you open a bank account in France, you have to present your wedding certificate if you are married.

¹⁷ Picaud 2015, 95.

¹⁸ Picaud 2015, 96.

¹⁹ Picaud 2015, 97.



matriarchal wife of the village chief. Women have domestic fights with their spouses, but are also ready to defend the village if necessary.

The village in particular plays an important role in the adventures, even though it is never named in the series. It is the place where all the stories end with a final banquet for the villagers, where even women are allowed to join in in more recent volumes – only Assurancetourix, the bard, is excluded (Cacophonix/Malacoustix in the British/American English versions). The final banquet unites the villagers and lets them live peacefully together. The Gauls' slogan could be “together we are strong.” It could be concluded that the village is the real hero of the *Asterix* series. It represents the strength of the community against invaders or tough times. The same phenomenon can be seen in contemporary French society when people gather together to show strength in the face of terrorist attacks or new labor laws.

APPEALING HUMOR

What is behind the enduring success of *Asterix*? According to historian Mary Beard, the basic storylines have broad appeal across Europe, and the United States seems to be “the only country in the west where *Asterix* has remained a minority of taste.”²⁰ Beard explains that some French critics have suggested that this American dislike is based in cultural chauvinism (i.e. *Asterix* is too sophisticated for Americans), while some others think that the underlying reasons are political (i.e. it is seen as an attack against American imperialism) or that *Asterix* is simply too European, based as it is in a common history and myths that are difficult for Americans to penetrate.

Goscinny and Uderzo's objective with *Asterix* was to make people laugh, and they have refused to give any other reasons for creating the series: “Our only ambition is to have fun.”²¹ Goscinny and Uderzo have left their artistic work to speak for itself. On the other hand, their immigrant backgrounds gave them observers' lenses through which to describe their own “Frenchness,” i.e. their culture and people, as well the cultures of others. By stereotyping and even caricaturing common cultural features, they make readers laugh at themselves, which enables them to recognize the alterity in themselves. Consequently, the comical effects of *Asterix* function on at least three levels: first, in the universe shared with the reader; second, in the stereotyped French gaze on others; and third, in mockery of certain cultural features.²² For instance, in *Asterix in*

²⁰ Beard 2002.

²¹ Goscinny cited in Beard 2002.

²² Rouvière 2015, 13-14.



Britain you can find pubs, the Tower Bridge, red buses, middle-class homes, the concept of privacy, and the politeness of British soldiers, which remains even as they are insulted by Roman invaders. In *Asterix in Spain*, the bullfighting tradition and the pride of the Spanish people are presented with light mockery.²³ However, some of the series' judgments of historical events are pejorative, as when, anachronistically, Asterix, decides to help Caesar against a common enemy coming from the East, namely Germanic invaders in *Asterix and the Goths* (1963). The volume contains a barely veiled allusion to the Nazi gas chambers, when it shows the pressure cookers (*cocotte pression*) the Goths use to torture the enemy.²⁴

This anachronistic transposition of people and events is another reason for the series' success. The reader enjoys finding intertextual relationships with references to real famous people, mainly actors, athletes, and politicians.²⁵ For instance, former French President Jacques Chirac is portrayed as a pretentious Roman economist, whereas actors Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy are legionnaires in *Obelix and Co.*; the famous English rock band The Beatles appears in *Asterix in Britain*; the James Bond actor Sean Connery is a Roman secret agent Zérozérosix/Dubbelosix in *Asterix and the Black Gold*; the actor Raimu from Marcel Pagnol's film *Marius* (1931) appears in *Asterix and the Golden Sickle* and in *Asterix and the Banquet*; and Arnold Schwarzenegger is a super-clone with a more than passing resemblance to Superman in *Asterix and the Falling Sky*. The *Asterix* volumes also contain references to social phenomena (e.g. HLM = *habitation à loyer modéré* – “rent-controlled housing” – the French taste for spending summer holidays in Spain, or Jacques Chirac's economic policy).

Sometimes these intertextualities may remain unnoticed by a foreign reader, as they are so culturally related to French society (characters resembling, for instance, the game show host Guy Lux, singer Annie Cordy, or advertiser Jacques Séguéla).²⁶ This does not have any impact on the overall reading experience, but it means that there is one humorous layer fewer for non-French readers to appreciate. This kind of intertextual knowledge is also needed to understand some transpositions of events. For instance, *Asterix in Belgium* contains allusions to the battle of Waterloo where Napoleon was defeated. This event is described in Victor Hugo's poem *Les Châtiments* (1853). The album *Asterix in Belgium* borrows the famous sentence from Hugo's poem when the Roman legionnaires run away crying “Sauve qui peut, Sauve qui peut” (i.e. “every man

²³ Cf. Mutta submitted.

²⁴ Rouvière 2015, 10.

²⁵ Le Monde 2015, 60-64; also Beard 2002.

²⁶ Le Monde 2015, 61-63.



for himself”).²⁷ In *Asterix the Legionary*, Uderzo has drawn a picture of pirates on a raft in a reference to Théodore Géricault’s painting *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) combined with the line “Je suis médusé” (“I’m medusa-ed/dumbfounded”) to make the reference more transparent to readers.²⁸ In *Asterix in Spain* there is a famous scene in which Caesar frees a captured red-haired man as an act of clemency. A man (A) in the audience asks another (B) about the event, and through wordplay, the answer presents two equally possible readings:

A: “Que fait César?” (“What is Caesar doing?”)

B: “Il affranchit le rubicond” (He will free the red-haired man”), or, “Il a franchi le Rubicon” (“He crossed the river Rubicon.”).²⁹

These intertextualities and/or anachronistic transpositions underline the fact that the *Asterix* series can be read on several levels and is not only children’s reading.

Another important ingredient of *Asterix*’s success worth considering is the role of violence in the series. All the villagers seem to have an *esprit gaulois*, a French spirit or mindset, as outlined in texts such as school books, folklore, and tourist guides. Goscinny and Uderzo transcended these collective characteristics of the Gauls in their series. The Gauls are described as a pugnacious people with a frank cheerfulness and a love of good food,³⁰ or as extrovert, intractable *bon viveurs*.³¹ Archeologist Matthieu Poux said in an interview in *Le Figaro* that

Today Asterix and Obelix overwhelmingly symbolise the Gauls, despite numerous errors that litter the albums. The comic has made hay from preconceived ideas in schoolbooks and has added the image of the Gaul who ‘resists’. [...] Likeable heroes who are fond of a bit of good flesh, who are poorly disciplined but have a sense of being in a group [sic]. We have here a kind of synthesis of the positive values of contemporary society and of the imaginary world created by Antiquity.³²

²⁷ King 2001, 13.

²⁸ Beard 2002.

²⁹ Mutta submitted.

³⁰ Rouvière 2015, 12.

³¹ Ory 2015, 80.

³² Quoted in Samuel 2011.



Le Monde editor Yann Plougastel affirms that the fights between the villagers and their many enemies can be described as a national sport that Goscinny and Uderzo use as a running gag to help create the series' comedy.³³ Goscinny worked in New York in the 1940s and was familiar with Anglo-Saxon humor, which can be seen in the use of several running gags in the series.³⁴ These running gags have great comic effect: we find the pirates who seem to sail into Asterix and Obelix at every turn, lose the fights and sometimes even sink their own ship to avoid perilous meetings; Obelix must be constantly prohibited from drinking the magic potion, since he fell into a cauldron of it as a child and has had permanent super strength ever since; and the freshness of the fish sold by Unhygienix (Ordralfabétix) is eternal question and a perennial cause for a fight in the village. Repetitions are an essential part of the narrative structure of comics,³⁵ and in *Asterix*, readers expect to find the same events occurring in a slightly varied form.

The violence in the series follows a repetitive narrative structure. The Romans and the pirates are beaten up in almost every volume, but these conflicts and violent acts do not cause any permanent damage. Neuroscientist Marcel Kamp and his colleagues have analyzed thirty-four *Asterix* albums and noted over 700 hundred head injuries in the *Asterix* comics.³⁶ They found that the majority of those involved in these injuries were adult males. The largest group of head-injured characters were Romans (63.9%), the major cause of trauma was assault (98.8%), and over 50% of these traumas were classified as severe enough that they could cause neurological deficit or even death.³⁷ But in the comics, the most common symptom was alteration of consciousness, which seemed to be the only noticeable damage done; all characters are left seemingly unharmed with the exception of some bruises.

A reader could be excused for being turned off by the series' continuous fighting and its prevalent head-trauma. However, it must be noted that the violence does not represent real life, and is not supposed to; it rather resembles the so-called slapstick style present, for instance, in the American animated series *Tom and Jerry*.³⁸ Moreover, not all acts of resistance in the series are violent. One of my own favorite acts of resistance appears in *Asterix in Britain*, when a Briton with

³³ Plougastel 2015, 42.

³⁴ Frappat 1950, 76; Plougastel 2015, 29.

³⁵ Groensteen 2011; Daures 2014.

³⁶ Kamp et al. 2011.

³⁷ Kamp et al. 2011, 1351.

³⁸ The American animated sitcom *The Simpsons* parodies *Tom and Jerry* in an even more violent animated series, *Itchy and Scratchy*. See also Collins 2011.



a javelin in his hand stops Roman soldiers who are pursuing the Gauls cross over his well-groomed lawn. One of the soldiers asks how he dares to oppose Rome and the Briton answers: “My garden is smaller than your Rome, but my pilum [javelin] is harder than your sternum”; this represents strong-minded but non-violent resistance with both javelin and words.

There is much more behind the *Asterix* stories than punches and knockouts, among which we can single out Goscinny’s talent for writing manuscripts. Comics scholar Thierry Groensteen describes comics as stories in images with a “predominantly visual narrative form.”³⁹ The image and text cannot be separated; they support each other. But there is no good comic book without a good script. Another comics scholar and comics writer, Benoît Peeters, argues that a tradition that derives from other art forms, such as cinema and popular literature, affirms this primacy of the text.⁴⁰ Comic books are, however, multimodal combinations of texts and images, and there is no comic book without an illustrator. The first twenty-four volumes were made by Goscinny and Uderzo, the next ten by Uderzo alone, and the two latest volumes, *Asterix and the Picts* and *Asterix and the Missing Scroll*, are illustrated by Didier Conrad and written by Jean-Yves Ferri. The stories follow Goscinny’s running gags tradition, but it is still too early to say if the series’ success will continue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Turning to the topic of war and conflict, the theme of this issue of *SJoCA*, it is worth noting that *Asterix* has not been used directly in terms of propaganda. Its relationship to war is instead a transposition of the representative image of French resistance to the resistance of a Gaul village and its inhabitants against Roman occupation. The Gaul region might be occupied by the Romans, but the small village resists and, through its resistance, makes the soldiers of the surrounding Roman garrisons adopt a *paix gauloise* (Gallic peace) lifestyle, which is illustrated by a *laisser-aller*, or “let-it-go,” spirit.⁴¹ Goscinny and Uderzo said they just wanted to make people laugh, but their creation reveals a more profound message, as it generates sympathy and evokes a common collective memory in its French readers.

³⁹ Groensteen 2011, 14.

⁴⁰ Peeters 2003, 161–163.

⁴¹ Rouvière 2015, 8.



There seem to be several factors that make readers enjoy these volumes of symbolic and symbolized Gallic identity. They make allusions to historical and contemporary events, use humor and running gags, and employ a repetitive narrative structure to reassure that the readers will find a familiar plot and an optimistic happy ending. Even the conflicts and violence are harmless and no one is really hurt; this also fulfills reader expectations. Goscinny and Uderzo advocate dialogue between cultures and defend liberty against all imperial powers.⁴² Fighting for liberty is a central message in these volumes. In our own time, when racism and hatred of immigrants are burgeoning in several societies, Goscinny and Uderzo's message is of utmost importance. It is not Asterix or other individual characters that represent the heroic image of the Gallic people; it is the village, the strength of the whole community that brings strength against oppressive powers.

⁴² Rouvière 2015, 14.



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