In the Name of the King
(It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's King Arthur!)
Or
The Arthurian Roots of Modern Super Heroes
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Senior Honors Thesis
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Second Reader: Professor Jennifer Miller

Forward

The only way I can describe the work that follows is that it is something more consuming than an obsession, something harder to kick than an addiction. Were I more advanced in years, this would be my life's work, a grand opus. But instead, this is more appropriately a stepping stone, a place from which to start my great journey through life. And who better to guide me, and whoever else may read this, than those who have always been with us, who we have always held in our hearts?

It all began with a simple question: why superheroes? Why, seventy years after Superman first leaped into action, are comic book superhero stories still so popular? Why do they generate such absurdly high box office receipts? Why are they enjoying a boom not seen in decades? Why are studios banking entire summers on men in tights? It could be the action sequences with which movie-making technology has finally caught up to. It could be the fact that comic books are familiar territory in which we can suspend our disbelief. It could be, as theorized by many academics attempting to uncover the reason for the popularity of the recent comic book superhero boom, any number of complicated, obtuse, and nuanced reasons. Or it could be something as simple as the fact that with the majority of comic book superheroes, we've seen these stories before. Not 'before' in the sense that we read comic books when we were children. But rather, 'before' in the larger historical sense. Perhaps the same world that is lapping up comic book superhero stories now has seen these same stories before, albeit in an attire wholly different from tights and capes.

This work began in my sophomore year of college, if I could put a solid date on it. But in reality, it was only that year that I realized a thought – a belief, really – that had festered inside my head and heart since my mother used to take me and my teddy bear into her bed to listen as she read to me the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. From out of those tales, that medieval anchor of Arthuriana, I decided to go into my pre-1800 requirement as a UC Berkeley English major with a fairly open mind. The moment that I first stepped into that classroom in Barrows Hall would fundamentally alter the rest of my college experience. Through English 114A, a class on Medieval cycle dramas, I met Professor Jennifer Miller, who, frankly, was the first person who didn't laugh when I mentioned superheroes and King Arthur in the same sentence. That class, and the several others I subsequently took with Professor Miller, opened my eyes to the inextricable links between the past and the present, and how each constantly resurrects and recalls the other, bestowing precious layers and complexes of meaning. Again, I turned to Arthur to guide my steps.

I stayed up late at night, watching the History Channel, as any student is wont to do, and again and again I saw specials on the "true" King Arthur. Intrigued, I kept investigating deeper and deeper, reading earlier and earlier texts, when Professor Miller introduced me to the Auchinleck manuscript. My work with that document provided the academic stage on which to unfold the drama of the constant pulsing of my brain.

The more I read of that Middle English tale of Arthur and of Merlin, the more I began to realize that I had seen that kind of imagery before, read those kinds of descriptions, those reverential tones. Again, I went back to those bedtime stories. But it wasn't my mother's voice

reading them this time. It was my own. And the pages were not those of some great leather-bound volume, but the sticky slick leaves of comic books.

My synapses seemed almost to close completely, each neuron touching all those around it. Thought moved faster than light, and far faster than my fingers could type. My obsession, my addiction, became my life, my soul, my purpose. The hallmarks of my childhood – comic book superheroes and King Arthur – were all of a sudden not just mystical figures beyond my reach, but rather partners, dare I say even family. They were on my mantle, in my t-shirt drawer, on my bookshelf and in my speakers. It was not an oppressive encompassment, mind you, but one that I reveled in, one that I bathed in and soaked up until I could soak no more. I drank it in with an open gullet and still could not imbibe enough. And that is what has driven me to write the following work – a desire to, in some way, define the indefinable, to give substance to that which resists substantiation.

The best way that I can describe this process begins with song. This is why many of my chapters have titles directly taken from popular music. It vibrates at a frequency that neither prose nor poetry can begin to enter. It vibrates at the frequency of the heart, the soul, the mind, and the imagination. It taps emotion and spirit, and so very often, that very thing that resists being bound to corporeal form. One of my musical refrains is lifted from a song by Train: "When I look to the sky, something tells me you're here with me."

If there is but a single sentence that can represent this work, it would be this single line. The once and future king, the flying caped wonders, and the illogical, irrational hope we place in them – all in one single line. And it is with this thought, this frame of mind, that I wish you to enter upon my work – to read it with the heart that we all had as children, and perhaps still hold,

deep inside our cynicism and our adult sensibilities. It is all I ask, that you open your heart and mind to the way we once were, each of us, when the world was still new to us, and when we still believed that a man could fly.

I will close this forward with one of the many conversations that I have had in my room at my fraternity, around my hookah, with papers scattered across the floor, on the subject of this work. One of my fraternity brothers, Josh Nimmo, was having a bit of a personal crisis. He was wondering if indeed his philosophy major was the right thing for him. He turned to me after taking a puff of pensive smoke, and asked, "How do I find my passion?" I put down my book on King Arthur or Superman, crossed one leg over the other, leaned back and sighed. "It finds you," I said. "I got lucky."

This whole ordeal, this two and a half year odyssey towards this work, has been a journey of discovery – not by me, but by my passion. It has held me in its arms since I was but a child, and it only revealed its true face to me when I was ready, when I had the tools to both look forward with adult eyes, and look back at my childhood with the same wonder that I had when I laid eyes on my first comic book. This has been a journey not only academic and scholastic for me, but a spiritual one. I have had to dig deep within my soul to find not just the "how," but the "why" of it all. It has made me understand a great deal about myself and about society. It has taught me that I am not the only man who still looks to the sky in his times of need, hoping, waiting for that flutter of a red cape or that flash of a sword. It has taught me the most important lesson that I have learned in my four years at the University of California, and in my two-plus decades here on this fragile blue marble – we are not alone. We always have our heroes. Whether they be real or the denizens of our collective imaginations, we have them. And we

share with centuries past the tradition of creating those heroes, not just by putting pen to paper, but by putting head to pillow. We all have participated in the great tradition of writing our heroes upon the parchment of our minds and our hearts, if not upon the pages of tomes or newsprint. Perhaps it is not to the sky that we should look, but deep into our own hearts for the heroes that we so desperately seek.

Introduction:
A Second Glance

> "I remember, when you were down
> And you needed a helping hand
> I came to feed you
> But now that I need you
> You won't give me a second glance"
> --The Kinks, *Catch Me Now I'm Falling*

Eight notes. Da, na na na na, NA NA NA. In just eight notes, over 70 years of history, social commentary, imagination, art, popular culture, and bedtime stories become as clear as the blue sky up into which those very notes urge us to look. Eight notes, speaking to the child within us all, and to memories that are not even ours.

All over the world, those eight notes have become identified with a singular figure, and it's not the man who composed them. John Williams' score for "Superman" (1978) has become so iconic and integral, that it is now as much a part of the character as the S shield that stretches across his chest. As director Richard Donner said, reflecting on his first viewing of the finished film, "The music came on, and it said 'Superman!'"[1] Of course, there were no lyrics to the

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[1] You Will Believe: The Making of a Saga. DVD. Prod. Constantine Nasr. New Wave Entertainment, 2006.

music that accompanied the opening credits, but it nevertheless spoke to Donner, a lifetime Superman fan. It represented for him the signature of a new mythology.

And indeed, that is what contemporary superheroes have become for many around the world, not just in the United States. Within the past decade, comic books and comic book superheroes have become a legitimate field of academic inquiry, and in the seminal works of this nascent scholarship, the stories of today's superheroes are likened – almost universally – to the mythologies of the ancient world, stories that were likewise once told in verse and in song. Like John Williams' score, ancient heroes like Hercules were sung of and lyricized. Songs of heroes and heroic deeds were sung to inspire soldiers before battle, to supply the warriors with "models of ideal heroic behavior."[2] One of the great pastimes of nobility "in heroic ages and in different times and places has been to gather in banquet halls to hear heroic songs, in praise of famous deeds sung by professional singers as well as by the warriors themselves."[3] The great Israelite warrior King David was himself "skillful in playing the lyre."[4]

But more than the musical similarities between heroes new and old, there are a great many elements of comic book superheroes that recall heroes of ages past. The Flash, DC Comics' Scarlet Speedster, debuted in January of 1940 with a winged helmet evocative of the messenger god Mercury. In 1962, in Journey Into Mystery Vol. 1 #83, stories of the Asgardian thunder god Thor made their first appearance outside of that heroic song and verse. Superman creator Jerry Siegel said of his Man of Steel that "I conceive of a character like Samson,

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[2] "epic." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 April 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-50868>.

[3] Ibid

[4] 1 Samuel 16:16

Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so."[5] Instead of Achilles leading his famed Myrmidons[6] in an assault on Troy in the heroic verse of Homer, we now have the super soldier Captain America leading the Allies against Nazi Europe.

And in fact like those heroes of old, who had songs sung in praise of their mighty and legendary deeds, so do modern superheroes have songs sung about them. The website http://www.urbangeek.net/supersongs/index.html lists, alphabetically, 127 songs that at the very least mention a comic book character, from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to Superman. Through the centuries, one of the hallmarks of a hero – or superhero – having an effect on the culture that he inhabits has been that association with music. It is a tradition that stretches from John Williams' theme all the way back to the ancient Classical heroes, and even to some of the greatest heroes of the so-called Dark Ages, a link that has as yet gone unexplored.

The fact that this link has gone unexplored is partly due to an attitude in the study of literature in the United States, the birth nation of comic book superheroes, that crystallized around the sacralization of certain "low" culture in favor of Victorian "high" culture that occurred around the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th. During that period, the works of Shakespeare became reserved for the elite, the "cultured," and the learned. Lawrence Levine, who radically posited the reconsideration of a stable literary and cultural canon in his work, Highbrow/Lowbrow, eloquently remarked that

> "if there is a tragedy in this development, it is not only that millions of Americans were now separated from exposure to such creators as Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Verdi, whom they had enjoyed in various formats for much of the nineteenth century, but also that rigid cultural categories, once they were in place, made it so

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[5] Peter Coogan. Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre. 1st. Austin, TX: Monkeybrain Books, 2006. pp. 117

[6] Edith Hamilton. Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1999. 197

> difficult for so long for so many to understand the value and importance of the popular forms around them."[7]

This is a foreshortened world view under which the study of literature still labors. The works of Shakespeare, who's many history plays used such Arthurian sources as Geoffrey of Monmouth (who's King Leir became Shakespeare's King Lear), were now "lost for a significant period," to the so-called unwashed masses who formed a great part of Shakespeare's contemporary and American audiences, as was the so-called cultural elite's "ability to discriminate independently, to sort things out for themselves and understand that simply because a form of expressive culture was widely accessible and highly popular it was not therefore necessarily devoid of any redeeming value or artistic merit." [8]

Popular culture, or "low" culture, to which I'm sorry to say comic books have been relegated, was typed as early as 1810 by John Howard Payne as catering to the "idle, profligate, and vulgar." Chief in a perception of "low" culture are so-called "folk" art and literature.

On the other side of the argument are men like anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who in his essay "Thick Description," the first in his book The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), argues that the folk anecdotes that he has collected, those which populate his field notes, are as valid as other, more traditional literary forms. His assertions are very much in the vein of those made by Roland Barthes in his distinctions between a Work and a Text, which will be discussed later. Traditional literary pieces, to Geertz, provide a kind of false sense of thick description, in that, for instance, British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's hypothetical description of a wink gains its layers

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[7] Lawrence W. Levine. Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. pp. 232.

[8] Levine, 232

of meaning because it is constructed as having such layers (i.e. the distinction between a wink and a twitch, or between these and a parody of a wink or even the rehearsal of the parodic wink). Geertz remarks of this exercise that "all this winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking, may seem a bit artificial."[9] He argues for the interpretive strategies of literary criticism to be applied to the "complex symbolic systems and life patterns that anthropologists" study, inviting literary criticism to make contact with reality, a cultural reality related uniquely by folk stories, because unlike Ryle's example, "the intentions and circumstances are not securely situated on the outside of the actions reported."[10] Comic books, folk tales, and other such "low culture," relate to and touch reality precisely because they are not constructed. They are windows into culture and society and come to "possess within themselves more and more of the culture's linked intentions."[11] Distinct from the philosopher's "artificial" stories, the folk stories that Geertz relates are "quoted raw." They "arouse bafflement, the intense curiosity and interest, that necessitates the interpretation of cultures."[12] The best way, Geertz asserts, to analyze distant cultures is by understanding their folk stories, because just as the stories act out culture, "culture itself is an "acted document.""[13] The quotations that Geertz notes in his field manual are themselves stories. This "insistence on narrative and on textuality helps to justify the appeal to techniques of literary analysis." Stories of the great King Arthur were once told in much the same way that Geertz was told by the Moroccan man Cohen of a

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[9] Stephen Greenblatt. "The Touch of the Real." Practicing New Historicism. Comp. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. pp. 21.

[10] Greenblatt, 25

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid, 22

[13] Ibid, 27

story of sheep stealing and the requisite exercise of justice. They were cultural stories, stories which are, in subtext, still present in today's stories of comic book superheroes, who gain their pedigree from King Arthur. Both Texts carry the mark of the cultures that bred them.

By the time Payne was writing, fewer and fewer theaters showing Shakespeare, for instance, were open to the "rabble," and more and more businessmen who managed theater chains saw an "unbridgeable gulf" that separated "tastes and predilections of the various socioeconomic groups," and so stopped showing Shakespeare, who had seen great popularity in venues as provincial as frontier towns and river ports. In the same way, the story of King Arthur was pushed from the realm of folk culture to popular culture and then to high culture as the English canon came to coalesce at nearly the same historical moment.[14]

Allan Bloom, in his bestseller, The Closing of the American Mind (1987), remarked on this shrinking community of the cultured that "the real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, true friends." In fact, however, those who restricted themselves to those "few friends" and such high culture lost more than they gained. They lost the historical memory of such "high" cultural art as it was when it was folk or popular art, further separating themselves from any possibility of expanding the canon to other, less "traditional" works.

Levine laments this, claiming, as I do, that "historians are told that they should diminish, if not abandon, their studies of that multiplicity of ethnic minorities, workers, immigrants, and women, about whose culture and role we still have so much to learn if we are to truly

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[14] Levine, 79

comprehend the American past." In a nation with a distinctly ethnic character, with a historical tradition of immigration, the very texts of those immigrants and marginalized groups are ignored in favor of some constructed notion of "high" culture. Superman is itself an immigrant text, written by two children of European Jewish immigrants. These are texts of Outsidership, of Otherness.

Paradoxically, comic books are not considered literature when they indeed share many elements with what is considered "literature." While many so-called literary works are lauded for showing alternative points of view, much of what is considered part of the English literary canon features "sweeping politically focused narratives that once supposedly gave us a sense of the unified whole, although in fact they focused overwhelmingly upon a decided minority of the population in terms of class, ethnicity, region, and gender." Students are discouraged from "tampering with the canon" and told to confine their abundant energies to the "short list" of works considered "worthy," as opposed to exploring greater alternative Texts. Not only do these alternative Texts grant access to an American past, as Levine asserts, but in the case of King Arthur and comic book superheroes, they grant access to a shared human past.[15]

I am just such a student of literature, which is why to me, comic books are so valuable. They recall the past and the way heroic stories used to be told, before they became bound (and gagged) and glossed in Penguin Classics or Norton's Anthology. There are myriad new sources and new Texts and works to study, not just those we are told to read in introductory survey courses and in the great majority of undergraduate curricula, save for those few intrepid professors who challenge accepted norms and think outside of traditional mores.

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[15] Ibid

In a February 1988 speech before four hundred university presidents and deans, former Secretary of Education William Bennett referred to such reconsideration of the cultural canon as tantamount to "curricular debasement" and accused faculty of "trashing Plato and Shakespeare."[16] What I aim to do here is not to trash Plato or Shakespeare, but to instead broaden their cultural impact by illustrating that the works of the treasured and sanctified "masters" are not dusty old tomes, but rather quite alive and well, if only we know where to look. Recall again that Shakespeare himself used Arthurian sources for many of his histories.

Because of this perceived gap between what is "high" culture and what is "low," none of the current scholarship on the subject of comic books and comic book superheroes has so much as broached a crucial intervening time period between ancient biblical and classical heroes and modern men in tights – one that stretches roughly between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the 19th Century. Author Peter Coogan traces the lineage of modern superheroes from Hercules and Samson to Robin Hood to Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernell, until finally bringing the family tree to Superman, from whom the rest of comic book superheroes descend.

In this conception, the evolution of the modern superhero begins with the story of the Greek hero Hercules (or Heracles), which dates back at least to Homer's Iliad (the oldest extant mention of the hero) from the 7th or 8th century B.C.E. Since the character of Achilles references the story of "Herakles" in the work, it is evident that the story and tradition surrounding the character are in fact much older, setting the outer edge of the heroic timeline at around 3,000 years ago.[17]

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[16] Levine, 253

[17] Herakles Undying: A Look at Herakles in Cult. Ed. Dr. Andrea Deagon. December 2000. University of North Carolina, Wilmington. 28 Apr. 2008 < http://people.uncw.edu/deagona/herakles/cultmain.htm>.

The Samson story, featuring a Herculean Israelite strongman who shares his Greek counterpart's love for food and drink, dates back to the Deuteronomistic histories of the Hebrew Bible, which were written around the time of the Israelite monarchy, approximately 1000 B.C.E., again, setting the outer edge at 3,000 years.

The Scarlet Pimpernel first opened as a play on October 15, 1903, and appeared as a novel shortly thereafter. Zorro was a character created by Johnston McCully in 1919 for a serial pulp magazine, and was depicted as a type of Californian Robin Hood, "championing peasants oppressed by a corrupt government."[18] Before the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro, the character of Robin Hood himself was mentioned as early as 1377. And, of course, depicted holding a car above his head on the cover of Action Comics #1 in 1939, Superman first appeared.

But what happened in those centuries between the professed ancestors of modern superheroes and their earliest modern relatives? In an anthropological sense, where is the missing link?

Like the ancient heroes, modern superheroes all have requisite superhuman elements. Some live abnormally long lives, some are depicted as giants, some are possessed of super strength or speed, and some are one-man armies. Like the early-20th century heroes, many superheroes wear masks and have secret identities. But in the 2,900 years between Samson and the Scarlet Pimpernel, current scholarship falls silent because it fails to consider what came between. No current scholarship indicates any intervening step between classical or biblical heroes and their modern counterparts.

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[18] Nick Evangelista. The Encyclopedia of the Sword. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. pp. 637

So how did the *hero* evolve into the *superhero* with such a large historical gap between the two traditions? What added the extra secret ingredient that turned masked men in capes into cultural icons? The question that is to be asked, therefore, is what – or who – is that missing link between the ancient heroes and modern superheroes? We have the common ancestors (Hercules and Samson), we have the close relatives (Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel), and we have the current generation, but how did we get there? The answer is that there has to be something in the middle in those centuries that fundamentally changed the heroic into the superheroic. That question leads to yet another, inevitable inquiry: who – or what – was that something? It is the link between Levine's "high" and "low" culture, a story that spans both forms, from campfire tales to Latin tomes to the silver screen.

That 'something' is the figure of King Arthur, which in its form, its function, and the content of his tales, plays an integral role not only in the development of superheroes, but in the very media in which they are presented, the way they are marketed, how they are thought of, discussed, created, constructed and considered.

This serves to answer yet another important question: Why should we care? If indeed Arthur is that missing link – be it as a character or as a body of literature – what does that matter to how we read comic books today? The key is that positing that relationship allows us to read comics with a more serious and literary eye, to consider them as legitimate forms of literature. Furthermore, with the similarities in the modes of production and character functions between Arthuriana and modern comic books, we get close to perhaps approximating a new theory of historical transmission. Both Arthur and characters like Captain America and Superman live as much in the air around us as they do on the glossy pages of their monthly installments. There is

an ephemera that surrounds the two flagship titles, things that people "just know," without ever having read a single page. It was similarly so with the evolution of the Arthur mythos.

King Arthur is the first heroic figure that becomes so great that it is able to cross the bounds between differing cultures and even languages. Within 50 years after Geoffrey penned Historia Regum Britannia, the story had been translated and redacted into several other continental languages, in prose and in verse, and new characters and episodes had been inserted into the story. No written matter at that time could spread so fast – at least physically, because the advent of the printing press was still three centuries away. Something in the story – perhaps its oral folk origins – allowed it to spread by word of mouth and by popular imagination. Why was Arthur so contagious? For one, because he displays four universally understandable roles which heroes from other cultures, at earlier points in time, fulfill. These four roles are as follows: the Boy King, the Warrior King, the Giant Slayer, and the Outsider. These same four roles also appear prominently in the formations of current comic book superheroes. These four roles are derived from a study of the heroic characters found in the Auchinleck manuscript, the oldest known monolingual Middle English manuscript, dated to 1330.

The importance of this document lies in the prevailing theory regarding the manuscript, which features three stories of primary concern for this project (*Kyng Alisaunder*, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, and *Dauid the King*). Prevailing scholarship indicates that the Auchinleck was created to engender a national identity by way of establishing a national literature for the nascent English nation, in that nation's own tongue.[19] The manuscript accesses many older traditions of Arthur, some of which it includes, some of which it explicitly excludes, and some of which it even alters.

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[19] Siobhain Bly Calkin. Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript. New York: Routledge, 2005. pp. 8-9.

According to the three works of concern in the manuscript, as well as to common and general perceptions of the biographies of the three main characters, I composed a list of four roles that were common to the three great kings from Biblical, Classical, and (at the time) current eras who merited their own works, all in close proximity to one another within the manuscript: King Arthur, Alexander the Great, and King David. It happens that those four roles fall exactly in line with the fictional biographies of many of the most popular modern superheroes.

The role of Boy King is primarily characterized by an early emergence of the heroic character or the abilities and characteristics that make him heroic or superheroic. The hero or superhero who fulfills the Boy King role takes on his primary set of responsibilities, or mission,[20] at a relatively young age. All of the characters who inhabit this project, from King David to Captain America, were "boys" when they first take up their respective missions.

A Warrior King is a figure who is involved in or gains fame and notoriety from engaging in physical battle or military campaigns. Alexander most certainly fits this mold, as does David, since both were renowned conquerors. David expanded the Israelite empire to its greatest extent, as Alexander did with Hellenic culture. Arthur also fits this mold, seeing as any contender for the crown of historical Arthur's claim to fame seems to cohere around a series of battle chronicles, the most famous of which mentioning the Battle of Mount Badon against Saxon forces.[21] Seeing as Superman and Captain America – the most prominent representatives of the modern superhero genre – both have as one of their defining characteristics a pledge not to kill,

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[20] Defined by Peter Coogan on page 31 of Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre, as "prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda."

[21] R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy. The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History From 3500 B.C. to the Present. 4th ed. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993. pp. 193.

one would seem to have difficulty portraying them as warriors. However, all one has to do is to look at the fact that Captain America was and is a soldier, who owes his very existence to top secret military research, to realize that he is indeed a warrior, in the simplest sense. He is also deemed a master strategist, as was King David. Superman fights his "never-ending battle," and often uses physical might to defeat his enemies, and in a panel from Mark Waid and Alex Ross's 1996 DC Elseworlds series, *Kingdom Come*, a private conversation with his female counterpart, Wonder Woman, yields this gem:

> "You said it yourself once, Clar – Kal. We are warriors. We have an obligation to wage combat." In response, Superman says, "Given who we are, Diana … Given the power we possess … we have a greater obligation to keep the peace."[22]

The role of Giant Slayer is perhaps the easiest role for a superhero or a hero to fulfill, as all it requires is a bit of creativity from whoever is writing the tales, and the idea of slaying giants is a motif that extends far back into human history.[23] But it is significant in that all of the superheroes whom I deem to be descendants of the Arthurian tradition and those who were antecedents of the Arthurian tradition all in some formulation fight some sort of giant-sized foes, be that gigantism literal or figurative. Of course, David slays the Philistine Goliath, who stood "six cubits and a span"[24] and taunted the Israelite army in I Samuel 17. The Alexander work too contains tales of him slaying giant beasts, but the most interesting of his conquests are the figures of Gog and Magog. These two entities, sometimes fused into one Gogmagog, first are mentioned in Revelations 20:7-8:

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[22] Mark Waid (writer), Alex Ross (artist). "Up in the Sky." Kingdom Come #3 (July 1996), DC Comics. pp. 15.

[23] "giant." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 April 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9036721>.

[24] 1 Samuel 17.4; Six cubits and a span equals about nine and one-half feet

> "And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea."

From their beginnings as ambiguous entities in the Bible, they evolve into a pair of giants in the Celtic and Welsh legends on the British Isles.[25] Though in *Kyng Alisaunder*, Gog and Magog are vary vaguely typed as perhaps nations of barbarians (Many man bitwene Gog / Thou shalt fynde and Magog / That Thou ne [founde] none swiche / Neuer in no kyngriche"[26]), as is interpreted by some biblical scholars, in other texts it is even more unclear who or what Gog and Magog are, and that it is only certain that there are 22 evil nations between them. They are ambiguously seen as either nations, geographical markings (such as two mountains), or perhaps as leaders of said nations.[27] Either way, the Gog and Magog that Alexander fights do become the Gog and Magog/Gogmagog of Celtic and Welsh legends, and while Alexander is not clearly seen as actually fighting the physical beings Gog and Magog, he still defeats the super-sized enemies in some formulation in battle and then erects a great gate across a mountain pass to keep them out of the civilized world. In many medieval traditions, the building of the gate and the defeat of Gog and Magog – as giants or as nations – are seen as the crowning achievement of Alexander.[28]

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[25] Mike Dixon-Kennedy. A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends. Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2004. pp. 189.

[26] Auchinleck MS, *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 5968-5971

[27] Gerrit H.V. Bunt. Alexander the Great in the Literature of Medieval Britain. Groningen, Netherlands: Egbert Forsten, 1994. pp. 9, 21, 23, 24, 32, 39, 77, 87.

[28] "The Legend of Gog and Magog", *Geographical Review*, Vol. 23, #2. (Apr., 1933), pp. 350-351

The presence of Gog and Magog in the Alexander work provides continuity with Giant-Slaying in Arthurian tales. In some Arthur stories, with the assistance of the giant Gargantua, Arthur fights and defeats the very same pair of giants.[29]

On the other side of the spectrum, the role of the Outsider perhaps seems the one most fraught with difficulty, for how does one define an outsider without a consistent cultural norm from which given characters can be excluded? How can one judge one outsider in terms of another? Yet, it continues to be as necessary a role for superheroes today as it was for the heroes of old to remain outside of the mainstream, so to speak. Heroes and superheroes may look and act like us, but the point is that they are categorically not us, by virtue of their birth, their appearance, or their extraordinary abilities. The key to this particular role, and to its greater significance, lies in the fact that despite some form of Other-ship, the Outsider hero becomes integral to the society or culture from which he is inevitably and inherently excluded, regardless of what culture that may be. Angela Ndalianis puts it best in her introduction to the anthology, Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman, when she states that superheroes

> "respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. Whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address. Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the *status quo*."[30]

There is perhaps no more poignant an outsidership than that shared by Arthur and Superman, who are outsiders by virtue of the one element of their existence that they could not control – their birth. Superman was born on another planet – a doomed one at that – and Arthur

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[29] Dixon-Kennedy, 189

[30] Angela Ndalianis. "Do We Need Another Hero?" Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman. Ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, Chris Mackie. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007. pp. 3.

is the illegitimate son of a king who begot him using deception, magic, and murder. Superman must deal with the inheritance of an entire race, where Arthur must constantly negotiate the fact that given his illegitimate origins, he is in possession of a birthright that is only his by default.

Like Arthur, whose youth is cause for doubt in his ability to be a king and a leader of men, David's youth is used against him when he offers his slingshot to defeat the giant Goliath. In I Samuel 17:33, King Saul says to the shepherd boy, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." Furthermore, as David's exploits in battle gain him fame and recognition throughout King Saul's people, David's popularity begins to rival that of the king himself, so Saul declares him an outlaw and hunts him down, fostering an interesting connection between the roles of Warrior King and Outsider.[31]

Alexander is perhaps the most obvious Outsider, in the sense that he was not Greek – though he is inextricably linked to Hellenistic tradition – but rather Macedonian, an affiliation that caused him great difficulty when he attempted to reconstitute the League of Corinth after his father's death. The old kings of Greece trusted the 20-year-old Alexander's now-deceased father, Philip II of Macedon, because he was one of them – a peer, even if not a ruler of a Greek city-state. It was not so with Alexander, who experienced considerable difficulty in reconstituting the League (more on that later).

These four roles are compelling on an aesthetic level, and that's all well and good, but because of my focus on the Auchinleck works in particular, it is necessary to more fully explicate the importance of that particular collection, and answer why *this* manuscript, in particular, is so

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[31] I Samuel 20:30-33

crucial to a conception of the figure of King Arthur, and his role in the future formation of comic book superheroes.

The Auchinleck is neither particularly early nor late in the Arthurian tradition. It is not one of the foundational texts of Arthuriana, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae or Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur. As I have stated before, it overtly excludes several storylines that would later come to define Arthurian lore – Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery as well as the quest for the Holy Grail.

The reasons for the importance of the Auchinleck's Arthur come from the aforementioned juxtaposition with *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Dauid the Kyng* as well as the Arthur work's appearance in several other significant collections of the time. In the collections that survive, *Of Arthour and of Merlin* is paired with *Kyng Alisaunder*. In fact, passages from the two stories eerily echo one another (see page 88). This Arthur story does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it an aberrant work, as it exists in four other manuscripts, though not in the detail of this version. But outside of the written word, off of the margins of the pages, is where the text of Arthur truly shines as far as its significance to comic book superheroes is concerned.

The Auchinleck's status as the earliest monolingual Middle English work belies a political and cultural impetus behind its production and the inclusion of the Arthur story itself. At the time that the Auchinleck is being assembled, a shift is occurring in the eastern region of what is now generally referred to as England (more correctly, the island of Britain). Nearly 300 years had passed since the Norman invasion of 1066, and at the time the Auchinleck was compiled, Norman influences were being worked out of the wider culture. In 1362, the Statute of Pleading established that court proceedings would only be conducted in English. The idea of

an English language and an English culture was beginning to take hold.[32] After 300 years of Norman influence, political tensions had boiled over, leading to a reaction against all things Norman, presumably including the French additions to the Arthur story and the French language. Laura Hibbard Loomis, in her London Bookshop Theory, set out that now-widely held belief that the project of the compilation, headed by Scribe 1 – the editor of the manuscript and the transcriber of the David, Arthur, and Alexander works[33] – was itself a politically-motivated one, set on establishing a national language and a national cultural identity by creating a national library of sorts in the new national language. It should come as no surprise then, that the central text of the manuscript is *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, which is the longest singular work in the manuscript. *Of Arthour and of Merlin* begins on the second column back of the 201st folio and concludes in the second column on the front of the 256th folio. The *Guy of Warwick* work, the main focus of Loomis' London Bookshop Theory[34] (which gave rise to all current scholarship on the Auchinleck), appears first composed in couplets, ranging from ff. 108ra (front side, first column) to 146vb (back side, second column), followed by the stanzaic version of the same story, which stretches from ff. 145vb to ff. 167rb. But it is the Arthur story that is the most complete and longest single work.

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[32] "English language." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 Apr., 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-74811>.

[33] The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. July 2003. National Library of Scotland. 1 May 2008 <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/psalm_head.html>, <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/alisaunder_head.html>, <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/arthur_head.html>.

[34] Loomis, Laura Hibbard. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340." *Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962: pp. 156-57. First published in PMLA (the publication of the Modern Language Association of America) 57 (1942): 595-627.

Where better to locate an attempt at creating a national literature than a manuscript centered around the greatest and most widely-known national hero? In a rhetorical move, Scribe 1 compiled, very close to one another, examples of kingship featuring a Classical military conqueror (Alexander), a biblical religious king from whom Jesus of Nazareth was descended (David), and the story of the idealized English, Christian king, Arthur.

Arthur's connections with the heroes of old as set out by the Auchinleck provide a touchstone of sorts between the widely-acknowledged antecedents of today's superheroes (the Biblical and Classical heroic traditions) and those superheroes themselves, a touchstone that would close a daunting historical gap of close to 3,000 years between those early heroes and today's costumed crusaders. However, the addition of the figure of King Arthur into the timeline still presents a significant gap of its own, owing to the historical displacement between any possible historical Arthur figure (likely a Romano-Briton general or sub-Roman Welsh warrior chieftain) and the present: a still-formidable 1,500-year gap.

Aside from the already-daunting millennium and a half separating the first literary mentions of Arthur and the first issue of Action Comics, there is also a perceived literary gap, seeing as Arthurian literature is considered – if not a canon in itself – an integral part of the larger English literary canon. In the Auchinleck, Arthur has already gained enough cultural cache to serve as the focus of an attempt to create a literature for an entire nation. At that point, more than two centuries had passed since Geoffrey penned Historia. In the past 70 years (happy birthday, Supes!) Superman and his fellow capes have become part of a similar cultural discourse in the United States and even throughout the world, to be sure, but have not yet been added to curricula of undergraduate literature courses, surely to the delight of critics like the Washington Post's

Jonathan Yardley, who lamented that the perception that "the good subjects for study already taken, they [professors of literature] have done the perfectly sensible thing and invented new subjects around which to construct their careers. This means that they must invest those subjects with academic legitimacy."[35] Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett similarly referred to the broadening or reconsideration of the cultural and literary canons as "curricular debasement," aimed at trashing Plato and Shakespeare.[36]

What I and other authors engaged in the broadening of the definition of "literature" are doing by studying comic books and their relationship to previous heroic literature is not to trash the old masters, as it were, but to broaden their appeal and make them matter – make the older literary traditions matter – in a post-modern world. There are myriad new sources and new works to study, not just those which we are told to read in introductory survey courses and in much of the current undergraduate curricula. Comic books are the very essence of that new wave of possibilities precisely because they echo the treasured, canonical traditions of heroic figures such as King Arthur. What I aim to do here is not to "trash" Plato or Shakespeare, but instead to broaden their cultural impact by illustrating that the works of these "masters" are not dusty old tomes, but rather quite alive and well, if only we know where to look. As old as the stories of King Arthur are, he is in his own right still present in literature today in the form of film (2004's "King Arthur", starring Clive Owen and Keira Knightly), drama (the comedy "Monty Python's Spamalot"), and yes, even comic books (King Arthur vs. Dracula, Camelot 3000).

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[35] Levine, 253

[36] Ibid

Arthur's central place in the Auchinleck is a perfect illustration of how integral the story itself is not only to a unified cultural body of literature, or a sense of English/British national identity (one already fraught with difficulty, but more on that later) but to the very language itself, both written and spoken. The works in the Auchinleck – Arthur included – provide important information about English dialects at an early stage.[37] The manuscript contains a large collection of Middle English poetry from a time where there are precious few Middle English texts that have survived. It represents a wide range of genres, including "romance, hagiography, texts offering basic doctrinal instruction, a chronicle, humorous tales, and poems of satire and complaint,"[38] illustrating that by the time this Arthur work was composed, English literature and literary composition was already advanced. They knew how to tell stories, many of them Arthur-centric, and had been telling them for a considerable amount of time. This collection puts Arthur into the linguistic realm of the cultures that created him. It is a way to linguistically redeem a story first authored and popularized in the realm of Western British orality, not Anglo-Saxon or Norman literature.

While the first quarter of the Arthur story contained in the Auchinleck appears in four other manuscripts, this particular version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* found in the Auchinleck is unique to the manuscript because of its considerable length and detail, belying a concern with telling the entire story, not just a fragment. But beyond the Auchinleck – which associates Arthur with the legitimacy of the whole of English literature and culture – Arthur had already achieved international fame by the time the Auchinleck was collected. By any sense, he was already an

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[37] The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. National Library of Scotland. 25 March 2008. <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/importance.html>.

[38] Ibid

international best-seller well before Malory got his hand into the mix. Today, whole sections of libraries are dedicated to the category of Arthuriana.

How can lowly comic books – and the superheroes that populate them – contend with that? How can they contend with what is largely accepted as one of the cornerstones of Western Literature? How can a medium which is intended to be disposable and temporary, with constant changes in writers and illustrators, constant changes to continuity and retroactive plot alterations, even come close to what is considered a near-monolithic literary tradition? The answers to these questions are at the heart of what Levine argued, and with the connection between such "low" culture as comic book superheroes and the lordly tradition of King Arthur, perhaps the even greater question of the canon can be vocalized more completely and have greater weight.

If one investigates closely enough, it becomes very possible – if not apparent – that Arthuriana and comic books are far more similar than a cursory – and often dismissive – glance would indicate. In fact, comic books and the superhero genre as a whole, in their striking similarities with Arthuriana, make a very compelling case for the inclusion of this alternative form of literature into what is considered the literary canon by the academic world, and thereby change how the concept of literature and the canon itself are defined.

Beyond just the arguably surface level character similarities between superheroes and Arthur that I have already gestured at (i.e. the four roles), the notions of authorship and the modes of production within the genre of comic books are remarkably similar to the notions and modes in the time that the Arthur mythos began to coalesce.

In its earliest and most formative period, Arthurian "literature" was *not* written down. It was an oral tradition, very much in the vein of folktale. It has been posited that it was in oral

composition that Arthur became conflated with the Celtic heroes who bore the sword Caledfwlch (better known by its more popular – and Latinized – stage name, Excalibur) and gained the integral elements by which we recognize him today.[39] Likewise, if one takes the definition of "folk literature" as meaning a tradition not written down, but rather passed by word of mouth, or perhaps in a more modern sense, not published, then comic books and the superheroes that inhabit them potentially fall into the very same category.

Comic books were originally produced on newsprint, destined for the trashcan. The earliest issues of Action Comics market Superman as "the most sensational strip character of all time,"[40] belying his appearance in daily newspaper comic strips. During World War II, when many early superheroes were getting their starts, advertisements appeared on the backs of those books that exhorted young readers to recycle paper for the war effort, and when the time came to recycle used paper, according to the President of DarkHorse Comics, Mike Richardson, the "first thing Mom wanted to throw out were those damn comic books."[41] They were never meant to exist for long as printed matter, but to exist in the hearts and minds of the readers, or at the very least provide momentary entertainment. Comic books and superheroes are part of a post-modern folk tradition, just as Arthur was part of a folk tradition before becoming a body of literature in and of himself.

But to say that comic books are part of the folktale genre solely by virtue of the fact that they were originally presented via a disposable medium that was not meant to be preserved is

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[39] Norris J. Lacy. "Folklore."New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[40] Jerry Siegel (w), Joe Schuster (a). "Superman." Action Comics #1 (June 1938), DC Comics.

[41] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. DVD. Dir. Steve Kroopnick. Perf. Peta Wilson, Denny O'Neil, Jim Steranko, Michael Chabon, Will Eisner, Mike Richardson, Kevin Smith, Frank Miller, Bradford Wright, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Joe Quesada, Avi Arad, and Neil Gaiman. The History Channel, 2003.

very much an incomplete assertion, because "folk" is not solely defined as "unpublished" or "unprinted." Folktales are defined by more than just their orality and extra-textuality. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, in his groundbreaking analysis of folktale conventions across cultural and linguistic boundaries, posited that there are seven character functions – or spheres of action – that inhabit stories that are part of the folktale genre, and these character functions are very specific in the way that they function within the folktale milieu.

The first sphere of action that Propp sets out is that of the villain. The sphere of action of the villain constitutes acts of "villainy; a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero; (and) pursuit."[42] In Arthuriana, this function is often carried out by multiple characters within the different traditions and tales. The most prominent of the villainous characters in Arthurian lore is Mordred. Though his relationship to Arthur varies from work to work, he almost always tries to usurp Arthur's position as King and leads the final battle against Arthur's forces. His pursuit, speaking in the Proppian sense, is of Arthur's throne. In some works, his villainous activities include claiming Guinevere for his own queen while Arthur is away questing for the Holy Grail. In the comic book arena, villains are likewise quite easily identified.

Superman's greatest foe, Lex Luthor, definitely engages in acts of villainy, such as his various quests for economic world domination and his willingness to put innocent people at risk for personal gain.[43] His fights with Superman are often by proxy (i.e. low-level henchmen or lackeys), however upon occasion, he has struggled with the Man of Steel in physical

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[42] Vladimir Propp. Morphology of the Folktale. Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968. pp. 79

[43] Jeph Loeb (w), Tim Sale (pencil), Bjarne Hansen (ink). Superman for All Seasons. Ed. Dale Crane. New York: DC Comics, 1999. pp. 96-97.

confrontation.[44] Luthor is characterized by his fanatical pursuit of Superman – he wants to drive the unwelcome alien from a world that he sees as his own. In short, he wants to drive the foreigner from his land.

The second sphere of action that Propp identifies is that of the Donor. The sphere involves the "preparation for the transmission of a magical agent; (and) provision of the hero with a magical agent."[45] In Arthuriana, there exist two main contenders for this particular character function. Propp asserts that this splitting of character function can and does happen in folktale, so positing that this same split occurs in Arthuriana is a legitimate claim. The first such donor would obviously be Arthur's court wizard, Merlin, who assists both Arthur and his father Uther Pendragon by way of magic and sorcery. A figure who more accurately fits Propp's definition of (magical) donor would be the Lady of the Lake, who in a good portion of Arthurian tales gives Arthur the magical sword Excalibur, the 'trademark' of the character, and one of the most enduring pagan elements of a story that became the exclusive property of a Christian society (a phenomenon which I will later discuss in great detail).

Going along with the theme of weaponry, Captain America's shield, the famous 2.5-foot, discus-shaped emblem of the Star Spangled Avenger, is in many ways (to be detailed later) a descendant of that unbreakable sword. Given its similarities to Excalibur (it is given to Steve Rogers in much the same way as Excalibur is given to Arthur by the Lady, it is unbreakable, and it serves as an emblem of the hero), and the fact that it is unable to be reproduced because of some "metallurgic accident" that created it, it can be seen as a product of modern magic

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[44] Jeph Loeb (w), Ed McGuiness (p), Dexter Vines (i). "Public Enemies." Superman/Batman #6 (March 2004), DC Comics.

[45] Propp, 79

(metallurgy and sword-making were long thought to be mystical arts by the uninitiated).[46] The round shield was given to Captain America in Captain America Comics #2 by none other than President Franklin Roosevelt himself as a replacement for Cap's earlier, triangular shield, much as in some iterations, the Lady of the Lake gives Arthur a new or repaired Excalibur to replace the Sword in the Stone (which is or is not Excalibur depending on the story).[47]

The next sphere is that of the "(magical) helper." Propp's helper sphere includes the "spatial transference of the hero; liquidation of misfortune or lack; rescue from pursuit; the solution of difficult tasks; (and the) transfiguration of the hero."[48] Arthur and his father Uther benefit from Merlin's spells, which include magical transportation and concealment. In the Marvel Universe, this role is often fulfilled by Dr. Stephen Strange, who uses his spells to conceal and magically transport various superheroes in order for them to accomplish their tasks, sometimes undetected.[49] In the DC Universe, this is very literally the sphere of the wizard Shazam, who transforms paper boy Billy Batson into the hulking Captain Marvel.[50]

The fourth sphere that Propp describes is that of the "princess and her father," a unitary sphere that involves a princess, her father, or both. The actions that fall within that sphere are to give the task to the hero, identify the false hero, marriage to the hero (in the case specifically of the princess), and to be the object of the hero's search during the narrative. Propp noted that

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[46] Patrick Barta. "The Mysticism of Swords and Sword Making." Ed. Pavel Neumann. ArmArt: pattern-welded swords specialist : forged replicas of fully functional swords and edged weapons. ArmArt. 1 May 2008.

[47] The first appearance of the Sword in the Stone episode in Arthuriana in the *Merlin* romance of Robert de Boron written in 1200 C.E.

[48] Propp, 79

[49] Jeph Loeb (w), Leinil Yu (a), Dave McCaig (colors/digital inks). "Denial." Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America #1 (Apr. 2007), Marvel Comics.

[50] Bill Parker (w), C.C. Beck (a). Whiz Comics #2 (Feb. 1940), Fawcett Comics.

functionally, the princess and the father cannot be clearly distinguished, and in some of the examples that I have discerned of this sphere of action, it is evident that Propp is still right, even decades later.

In the Arthurian text, the "princess and her father" are Guinevere and her father, King Leodegrance. Guinevere marries Arthur at her father's behest as a form of treaty between the two kings,[51] though in the Auchinleck it doesn't take much convincing for the swooning princess to accept the offer of marriage to such a great warrior, who she witnesses displaying his prowess on the field of battle.[52] In post-Galfridian Arthur stories, part of this treaty includes the most famous piece of furniture in all of literary history – the Round Table.[53]

In Superman, the action that Propp describes as identifying the false hero is more fully fleshed out, as it is Lois Lane who identifies the falsity of the four Supermen who come to replace the real deal after Superman's apparent death at the hands of the creature Doomsday, and it is Lois who finds Superman's tomb empty before the arrival of the four Supermen.

However, comic book aficionados will note that it is not Lois alone who fulfills this action, though it is she who discovers that the four Supermen are not the real deal.[54] In a scene reminiscent of John 20:24-29 (the story of Doubting Thomas) John Henry Irons (the hammer-wielding hero known as Steel), standing beside Lois in front of an emergent Superman, squeezes the black-clad figure's shoulder. Superman winces in pain, explaining that he's not back to full strength yet. He looks to Lois and attempts to prove who he is by using the phrase, "To Kill a

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[51] Norris J. Lacy. "Leodegrance." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[52] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 5985-5994

[53] Norris J. Lacy. "Leodegrance." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[54] Roger Stern (w), Jackson Guice (p), Denis Rodier (i). "An Eye for an Eye." Action Comics #688 (July, 1993), DC Comics.

Mockingbird," which Lois knows is Clark Kent's favorite movie. In this way, she reveals the true hero.[55]

The fifth of Propp's spheres of action is that of the Dispatcher, the character who makes a certain lack known and sends the hero off on his quest. In Arthurian text, this is easily identifiable as Merlin, who takes part in Arthur's conception and in his revelation as the true king. The lack, in this case, is the lack of a strong leader, a legitimate king.

In Marvel Comics, this is often the Merlin-esque Prof. Charles Xavier, the headmaster of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, and the secret leader of the mutant superhero team, the X-Men. He sends the team off on its various missions and explains the importance and tasks involved in those missions to his pupils, leaving them in the charge of the team leader, Scott Summers, codename: Cyclops.

For Captain America, the Dispatcher is often the United States government, but just as often as not, he is the one who calls the shots for the super-team, the Avengers.

The next sphere of action that Propp defines is the Hero, who reacts to the Donor, and who weds the Princess. This one's pretty easy: King Arthur fulfills this, as do all of the other superheroes in this discussion.

Propp's final sphere of action is perhaps the richest in terms of the characters herein described. Propp describes the False hero/anti-hero/usurper as one who "takes credit for the hero's actions or tries to marry the princess."[56] The character of Mordred, or Medraut, early on takes the mantle of Usurper. In Geoffrey's Historia, while King Arthur is taking an army to the

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[55] Dan Jurgens (w, p), Brett Breeding (i). "Resurrections." Superman #81 (Sept., 1993), DC Comics.

[56] Propp, 79

gates of Rome, Mordred is back in England marrying Guinevere without much resistance from the queen. In other stories, he even sires children by her. He essentially takes over the throne until Arthur returns from his expedition to depose him. In later redactions, Mordred is very much an anti-Arthur, conceived by magic and deception as the result of incest between Arthur and his half-sister. He therefore would have a legitimate claim on the throne, being of royal blood on both sides. It is Arthur's denial of him in these redactions that touches off the war which consumes them both.[57]

The most prominent False hero/usurper in recent Captain America continuity first appeared in Captain America Vol. 4 #36. After Steve Rogers has perished in an assassination in Captain America Vol. 4 #25, his paramour, Sharon Carter, is taken captive by Cap's greatest enemy: the Red Skull. Trapped in the Skull's compound, Carter wanders around looking for an escape route. On the last pages of the issue, she runs into a holding tank with a small window. Through the viewing port, she sees what looks like the healthy body of a hibernating Steve Rogers, when events in previous books had already established that the real Captain America's body was buried at sea to be protected by Namor, the Sub-Mariner. At the end of Captain America Vol. 4 #37, the seemingly resurrected Rogers is lying in an anteroom covered by a hospital sheet. Thinking she's going to save her man, Sharon sneaks into the room and approaches the figure. "Steve…? Can you … can you hear me?" she says. Groggily, the half-shadowed "Steve" says back, " …what…? Who … who's there…?" He sits up, revealing something that makes Sharon recoil in horror. On the final page of the issue, Carter looks at the still-half-shadowed figure, now seen in full with some sort of concealed skin injury on his left

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[57] Raymond H. Thompson. "Mordred." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

shoulder. Sharon steps back, "You're not – You're not Steve," she says. The awakening figure says, "Wait … yes … Steve … Steve … Rogers … Yes. That was my name …But … who are you?" The entire left side of this Steve's body is covered in what appears to be burns and scars. While the first view the reader gets at these is of discolorations on his shoulder (thereby presumably standing for the places where the real Steve Rogers was shot), the pull-out panels show that the scars are not just bullet holes, but rather burns. The man who looks like Rogers is of course not. He is the Captain America of the 1950s, a failed revival of the character by Stan Lee, with Mort Lawrence and John Romita, Sr. in Young Men #24-28 (Dec. 1953-May 1954). When that run of Captain America failed miserably, the figure was retroactively inserted into the continuity as a false pretender to the title of Captain America, a man who in fact idolized the real Cap to the point of obsession. The unnamed history teacher attains a PhD in American History, with a thesis on the life of Captain America (a bit unsettling, but I promise I won't be dressing up in spandex any time soon!) and researches Project: Rebirth, revealing the real identity of Captain America and the lost Super Soldier formula. He legally changes his name to Steve Rogers, gets surgery to alter his voice and appearance to match Rogers, and angles to become the next Captain America during the Korean War.[58]

The problem with this new "Steve Rogers" is that the serum he ingested was unstable, having traumatic psychotic effects. The United States government put the 1950s Cap into suspended animation, until he is awakened decades later by the villainous Dr. Faustus (Skull's partner in the most recent Cap story arc and one of the jailors of Sharon Carter). Faustus turns

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[58] Steve Englehart (w), Sal Buscema (p), and Jim Mooney (i). "Hero or Hoax?" Captain America Vol. 1 #153-156 (Sept. 1972-Dec. 1972), Marvel Comis.

this unnamed man into The Grand Director, the leader of a Neo-Nazi group called the Natural Force. Eventually defeated by Captain America, he allegedly incinerates himself.[59]

But with the burn-like scars on this new Steve, and his connection with Faustus, it is nearly a certainty in the comic book community that this figure is in fact the Grand Director, a part of a typically diabolical Red Skull plot.

Another similarity between the literary tradition of Arthur and that of comic book superheroes is the concept of social authorship, a process by which the readers, or audience, become a part of the creative process, thereby culminating in Roland Barthes "death of the author." Instead of a singular "genius" or "auteur," the masses that Payne called "idle, profligate, and vulgar" control the text, as it moves from the writer's desk and into the public sphere. This is why the 1950s Captain America failed. Fighting Communists was not seen as being "true" to the nature of a character who had fought such unquestionable evils as Adol Hitler and his Nazis. Beyond the similarities between the forms (folktale) and functions of the two genres (comic books and Arthurian lore), this is the one similarity that goes beyond the margins and into the realm of social consciousness. The aforementioned folk nature of comic book superhero stories illustrate how a very real modern mythology has grown up around them in much the same fashion as it did around Arthur, whose stories transitioned freely from the folk realm to that of literature without the impediment of the distinction between "high" and "low" culture. Ideas born in the public consciousness have come to be integral parts of what authorities in both genres consider canonical within their respective universes.

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[59] Al Milgrom (i) and Keith Pollard (p). Captain America Vol. 1 #232-236 (Apr. 1979-Aug. 1979), Marvel Comics.

What I have come to realize is that by linking the post-modern emergence of comic book superheroes as central figures of a new mythology to the mythos of King Arthur, a new and very exciting theory of historical transmission emerges, one which binds high and low culture and literature together, not in a continuum or a cycle, but as a single unit. The only thing it seems that separates the two is time.

What we now take as literature, we receive from the generations before us. We all-too-seldom question those sources. We all-too-seldom forget to realize that there are works and texts that came between what we consider as the Classical roots for modern heroic texts and the texts themselves that can and indeed must be considered.

The Text of King Arthur is the bridge, the key ingredient in these comic book superheroes that separates them from the mere strongmen and gods of ancient tales and binds them into a body of "alternative" texts that should be included in the Canon of high culture's literature. In the end, it is not King Arthur himself – whether that self be the historical or the literary character – who is being resurrected or revived as per the "once and future king" concept, but rather the Arthurian tradition of folk literature, the way that the greater Text is formed both on and off the page, and the crucial role that social authorship plays in the conception of both lordly Arthuriana and "lowly" comic book superheroes.

The character of King Arthur serves as a huge turning point in the formation of the foundations for today's modern heroes. Part of the baggage that they inherit from Arthur is the idea of the Once and Future King – the idea that the great hero will somehow, sometime, return to save us. The inheritance that these Arthurian progeny received was an inheritance of hope.

The key in the definition of a superhero is that he or she has a pro-social mission,[60] and the heroes of ages past, such as the voracious Samson, the raging Hercules, the prideful Achilles, the conniving King David, and the propagandizing Alexander, most certainly did not. Arthur, however, did, and that message, be it represented as a unification of warring tribes or as the vision of Camelot as a white city on a hill – it is still prescient and important, and without that social consciousness, that moral code, indeed without both the Text and the Figure of King Arthur, comic book superheroes would be unrecognizable.

Chapter 1: Definitions

> "Tell me to be what they want me to be
> Everybody thinks that it's so easy
> Eometimes it seems like there's two sides of me
> Everybody thinks it's so easy being me"
> --Plain White T's, *It's So Easy*

Before diving headlong into a more detailed and measured argument, it is necessary to set out definitions of the terms through which I will make that argument. The first two terms are integral to how each of these genres are perceived are "work" and "text," because when dealing with such a prolific body of literature as Arthuriana and the expansive universes of comic books (and believe me, they are expansive – the Arthurian, Marvel, and DC Encyclopedias could all injure small children), it is crucial to establish that they are part of a larger narrative.

Barthes, in his essay *From Work to Text*, offers up definitions of those respective terms that this project utilizes, because when speaking of Arthuriana and comic books, one must

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[60] Coogan, 30

remember that the two are more than just the sum of the words on the pages of any given document.

At the most basic level, Barthes establishes that the text is not a definitive object. The simplest distinction that he offers is the one which I instruct readers to keep in mind when understanding the rest of Barthes' argument. The work "can be held in the hand," while the "text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse (or rather, it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text)."[61] In short, a text is all-encompassing, and acknowledges itself as such. To refer to a Text is to refer to the body of literature that constitutes a tradition. Work on the other hand, is concrete.

Take for example the latest comic book film, "Iron Man," staring Robert Downey, Jr. After the final credits have rolled, the screen cuts to the billionaire Tony Stark (Iron Man's alter ego) walking into his Malibu living room, and standing in front of his picture window overlooking the Pacific Ocean is a trench-coated figure. Fans who had read internet rumors knew this figure to be Samuel L. Jackson in a cameo as S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nick Fury, the man in charge of Marvel's Ultimate universe version of the Avengers, a super-team which includes Iron Man, Thor, Giant Man, the Wasp, and Captain America. Downey, Jr.'s Stark asks the figure who he is, and Jackson's Fury turns around, introducing himself. He tells Stark that as a superhero, he's not the only special one out there. There is a "whole universe" of people just like him, ostensibly referring to the Marvel Universe – the whole of all characters and locales within Marvel Comics. Though the film is a work – it can be held in the hand as a film reel or a DVD, eventually – it is a part of the greater Text. In fact, Downey, Jr. makes a cameo of his own

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[61] Roland Barthes. Image – Music – Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. pp. 157.

in a similar post-credits scene at the end of the upcoming "Incredible Hulk" film, starring Edward Norton as the tortured Dr. Bruce Banner. Tony Stark offers his services – supposedly after he has met with Fury – to General "Thunderbolt" Ross, father of Banner/Hulk's paramour Betty, and the Hulk's constant molester. The exchange hints at Iron Man, at Fury's direction, helping Ross to contain the Hulk. In the "Iron Man" scene, Fury had mentioned the "Avenger Initiative," hinting at a future Avengers film. In the Marvel Universe, the first opponent the Avengers faced was in fact an enraged and rampaging Hulk. Whereas comic book movies had heretofore been rather self-contained, they are now in dialogue with one another, no longer singular works but rather constituent parts of a greater Text. Barthes said that "the Text cannot stop (for example, on a library shelf); its constituitive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works)."[62] The Avengers, as in the comics, now cut across several works in film.

Work, on the other hand, "can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the text is a process of demonstration," according to Barthes. Work's domain is the library shelf.[63] Text is less substantial, and functions as a paradoxical and subversive force in regards to old classifications.

A Text resists easy classification according to traditional categories and hierarchies. The text pushes the limits of readability and rationality. Comic books certainly push the limits of rationality, for in what reasonable world would you have a Prince of Atlantis (Namor, the Sub-Mariner) warring with a flaming android (the original Human Torch) and then turning his anger

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[62] Barthes, 157

[63] Ibid

on the forces of the European Fascist powers and fighting alongside his former enemy? In what rational world does an irradiated spider bite a high school student, giving him the ability to stick to walls? And in what rational world does a paper boy cry out a magic word to transform into a hulking, flying strongman?

Pushing the limits of readability and resisting traditional classification is what I set out to do here. These are in fact the stakes of this project. Traditionally, comic books are the stuff of children. The worlds depicted in comic book panels, to any adult with knowledge of physics, probability (why are the bad guys always such bad shots?), biology, and astronomy are so fantastic as to defy belief, and therefore legitimacy as a literary endeavor. But paradoxically, tales of a boy who pulls a magical sword from a stone, then becomes the king of all England with the help of a wizard, are seen as a perfect example of what "real" literature is. What is viewed is only the end product, not the historical run-up, for if the history of the character of Arthur was put alongside the canon of Arthuriana, it would more closely resemble the history of the development of comic book superheroes.

Even within the two genres, separately, there occurs a similar resistance to classifications. To speak of the body of Arthurian text is to speak of narrative verse, prose, metric verse, Romances, pre-modern, modern, post-modern, film, drama, music, and yes, comic books.[64] How then can one classify the Text Arthuriana as any single thing? Works may be classified, yes, but not the Text.

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[64] Adam Beranek (w), Christian Beranek (w), Chris Moreno (a), Jay Fotos (a). Dracula Vs. King Arthur #1-2 (Oct.-Nov. 2005), Silent Devil Press; Mike W. Barr (w), Brian Bolland (p), Bruce Patterson, et al. (i). Camelot 3000 #1-12 (Dec. 1982-Apr. 1985), DC Comics.

In 1991, Sandman #19, which featured an adaptation of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream including the title character, a superhero known as Sandman, won a World Fantasy Award for best short story. No comic book had ever won such a prestigious award. Now, not only could the illustrations in comic books be considered art, but the stories and adaptations themselves.[65] The idea of the Text, which includes the ephemera and that which lies outside the margins of any particular work under the umbrella of a traditionally defined (i.e., written down) text, outlasts and has greater significance than any single particular work. Indeed, Barthes seems to have predicted the inclusion of 'other' forms of literature into the body of the Text, which he said "does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres."[66] The Text, according to Barthes, is "held in language" itself, in any medium, be it oral or written. His definition of the Text regarding its multivalent character, including many different styles and types of works almost perfectly defines both the world of comic books (with toys, piggy banks, video games, television specials, coloring books, Happy Meal giveaways, films, sequels, prequels, animated Saturday morning cartoons, stage performances, etc.) and Arthuriana (Excalibur replicas, Excalibur earrings, letter openers, restaurant chains, Las Vegas hotels, Saturday morning cartoons, films, stage performances, video games, etc.). The Language of which Barthes speaks does not necessarily have to refer to words, but to an understood discourse, a language of signs.

The Text is approached and experienced all in reaction to the sign, whereas a work closes in on a signified. Because of this, the work can only function in two modes of signification.

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[65] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 1:14:20

[66] Barthes, 157

Either the signified can be claimed to be evident or it can be considered secret, "something to be sought out." In the first case, the work becomes the object of a literal science, which is to say that it can be dissected and its meaning deduced. In the second case, the work then falls "under the scope of a hermeneutics, of an interpretation."

Instead of falling prey to strict definitions of meaning or subjective and vague interpretation, a Text participates in the infinite deferment of these signs, of the signified. Because of its size and complexity, instead of having finite levels of signification, as a work does, it has a multi-dimensional web of signification. The Text, says Barthes, participates in an "infinite deferment" of the signified. It dilates the signified. Where the work functions as a "general sign" that functions within the civilization that produces the Sign, the Text, because it cuts across works and genres, takes as its field the signifier, which "must not be conceived of as 'the first stage of meaning', its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its deferred action."[67] The concept of the once and future king, for instance, in reference to King Arthur, is frozen, yet somehow unstuck in time. Yes, it is set in the midst of a remote period of history, in a culture and a society that we cannot know, and yet, somehow it is as evocative today as it was back then. To be able to understand such distant cultures, Geertz says, "the interpreter must be able to select or to fashion … units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention."[68] The Arthur Text has done that for us, in the forms of its constituent elements – the sword, the battles, and the four roles. It is remote, yet still prescient, despite the fact that while that supposed promise of Arthur's return was made

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[67] Ibid, 158

[68] Greenblatt, 26

centuries ago, it has still not come to pass. It is the ultimate deferral, not unlike the New Testament's continual negotiation, through the Gospels, of the fact that Jesus would return, when as the years passed, and that promise seemed more and more remote in time, the writers of those Gospels had to keep deferring and renegotiating the terms of the Second Coming.[69]

Comic books, following Barthes' conception of a Text, constantly engage in this renegotiation, particularly in regards to boundaries in a world defined by them, one of those boundaries being death. It was long held as an axiom among comic book fans that no one in comics stays dead except for Bucky (Captain America's kid sidekick during World War II), Jason Todd (the second Robin, killed off by fans by a telephone vote), and Uncle Ben (Peter Parker's father figure, and the first to say, "with great power comes great responsibility."). But, as has been proven over and over again, even with the first two members of this trinity, no one ever stays dead in comic books. There's always a clone, some magic spell, some fortuitous accident, a time travel bubble, or divine resurrection. The meanings of the signifier (i.e. death) are continually renegotiated and dilated to create a perpetual web of signification.

Because of this, the Text is "plural," not in meaning, but rather in the fact that it does not answer to a single interpretation. This is not to say that the Text is ambiguous, mind you. Instead, it has what Barthes calls a "stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers."[70] There is constant and irreducible interplay between the meanings of the signifiers so that there is, in a sense, constant motion, a wave of meaning that ripples through the Text. The Text is "multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and

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[69] Steven Goldsmith. "Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels." University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Berkeley, CA. 13 Apr. 2007.

[70] Barthes, 159

perspectives,"[71] in a sense, predicting Barthes' later work, *Death of the Author*, in which it is not the creator who posits meaning, but later readers and redactors. The continual cycling of writers and creators through the worlds of comic books and Arthuriana, along with the unique role that fans and readers play in determining what is "canonical" in both, which will be addressed in further detail later, supports labeling comic books and Arthuriana as Texts, and their constituent parts as works.

Metonymy – the association of part to whole – characterizes the logic of the Text, the way it speaks and functions. Metonymy in particular plays a huge role in both the Text of Arthuriana and the Text of comic book superheroes, in conjunction with metaphor.

Barbara Johnson[72] claims that previous historical distinctions made between the two literary techniques of metaphor and metonymy are in fact nonexistent, that both metaphor and metonymy are two sides of the same coin. Speech – and thereby expression – cannot function with one and not the other. Cultural and societal association (metonymy) and analytical association (metaphor) cannot exist without one another.

This is not to say, however, that they are the same thing. Because, as illustrated in the examples given from Their Eyes Were Watching God, "the reduction … has as its necessary consequence aphasia, silence, the loss of the ability to speak." And without the dialogue between the Text of comic book superheroes and the Text of Arthuriana, there would be no premise for any kind of historical transmission by any means.

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[71] Ibid

[72] "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God." Black Literature and Literary Theory. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Methuen, 1984. 205-219.

The assertions that Johnson makes speak to the connection between the famous Excalibur used by King Arthur and the discus-shaped shield wielded by Captain America, who, it must be noted, was frozen in ice at the end of World War II (retroactively established in March 1964's Avengers No. 4), only to return to continue his fight in the then-present of the 1960s – a "once and future" soldier not unlike Mallory's Arthur.

There is already an implicit connection between the two, despite their functional differences. Each is seen as nigh indestructible, made of wondrous metals. Both serve as symbols for the two heroic figures. Captain America's shield echoes the design of his costume, and has even been put on t-shirts in the same vein as Superman's S shield. While later on in the development of Arthuriana, King Arthur became connected with heraldic shields, he is connected with the sword from a far earlier point. The Sword in the Stone or the gold-hilted sword is as representative of King Arthur as any of the various heraldic shields he has been associated with. The one constant has been the sword.

But there do seem to be some important differences. The first is that Excalibur stands for the right to rule. The sword is a metonymic representation of royal power (the figurative Sword Temporal, as it were) and the right to rule Britain. The shield, on the other hand, is a metaphor for America's rhetorical preference for peace as shown in the Great Seal of the United States: the eagle turning towards the olive branch in its talons, and away from the arrows in its other talons. It is a defensive weapon, as opposed to Excalibur, which is a weapon of offense.

However, Johnson's assessment that metaphor and metonymy are in fact operating in concert, that the two are not mutually exclusive and are both required to perform speech, deepens

a conception of the connections between the two weapons. The change may seem slight, but so does a sword look thin and delicate when viewed edge-on.

Instead of just being a metonymic object, Excalibur is also a metaphor for the battles which a Warrior King must fight to gain his power of rule. The sword becomes a metaphor for offense, in much the same way the shield is a metaphor for defense. Along with the shield being just such a metaphor for the idyllic defensive posture of the United States, it is also metonymic, as it resembles the hero himself, with his red, white, and blue costume.

One cannot make the connection between these important themes of the two weapons without either metonymy or metaphor. The two methods do not describe the same significance in relation to either one of the objects, but they describe different parts of the mythos surrounding each weapon which cannot operate without one another.

Excalibur itself may be a symbol of kingship and right to rule, but without Arthur, the warrior king who pulls it from the stone,[73] it cannot stand for success in battle or the unification of Britain for which Arthur, the nebulous historical figure as well as the literary hero, is remembered for.

Captain America's shield functions as a reference to the defensive posture of the United States, but without the man behind the shield, whose very attire is a reflection of the decoration of that shield, it is merely an object. The shield is representative of the hero, in that he is also a shield, America's defense against foes domestic (terrorists, in the modern era), foreign (the first cover of a Captain America comic book shows Captain America delivering a blow to the chin of

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[73] The first instance of this being a test of kingship is in Robert de Boron's Merlin. De Boron explained that the sword represented justice (i.e. the Sword Temporal) and the stone itself represented Christ, thereby establishing King Arthur as a defender of Christianity and as king by divine right. (Norris J. Lacy. "Sword in the Stone." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.)

Hitler), and otherwise (as leader of the Avengers, Captain America has defended the earth from alien invasions).

In a sense, the weapons cannot function as coherent speech acts (they cannot convey that which they do) without either their metaphorical aspects or their metonymic aspects.

Aside from metonymy, Barthes cites as a characteristic of the Text as opposed to the Work the fact that the text is "radically symbolic." Well, what is it to be radically symbolic? Barthes uses this term in relation to "moderately symbolic," which is a characteristic of the Work. The symbolism of the work runs out and comes to a halt. Because a work is restrictive, it does not offer the limitless procession of interpretation that a Text does. In fact, Barthes says, the Text "accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural."[74] Works may have several meanings, but those readings and symbols are finite.

The beauty of a Text as Barthes defines it, especially in light of this project, is that other than its irreducibly plural meaning, it requires that the reader "try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single unifying practice."[75] Because of this opening of the barn door in a sense, the Text is left open to be continually re-written over and over again by any number of potential readers and writers. Sound familiar? It should, because comic book superhero stories, largely because of the financial implications of successful characters, are continually perpetuated. In the comic book world, it would seem, whatever sells can be left open, and eventually, after seven decades or so, you can fill a stadium with the people

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[74] Barthes, 159

[75] Ibid, 162

who have worked on the character. But the realities of the comic book industry are that the books themselves don't sell as well as they used to. In fact, comic books themselves are one of the smallest portions of a comic book company's overall bottom line. They sell Halloween costumes, apparel, art prints, limited-edition prop replicas, films, and action figures, which young children (including yours truly once upon a time) play with, writing in their imaginations the stories that they may just write twenty years down the road, when they become writers and illustrators for the comic book industry (it happened with Joe Quesada, the current Editor-in-Chief of Marvel). The greatest ware comic book companies produce are not the works – the individual comics – but the Text of their proprietary superheroes.

The story of King Arthur has also been told this way, with each generation inspiring and shaping the next, and then that second generation operating in the world of the first, continually changing and renegotiating that world until they leave their own mark on it, a mark destined to be remade by the next generation and the next, and on after that. Each time period is in conversation with one another, and each genre and media is part of that same conversation. The idea of the "once and future king" allows for this continual renegotiation, and in fact resurrection, literarily and within the world of the Text.

While no author has made the connection between ancient heroes, King Arthur, and superheroes, they do acknowledge the fact that this kind of intertextuality has occurred on a micro scale.

They have made connections within their levels of culture, i.e. high or low, or within their own fields, i.e. pre-modern and post-modern, but not across the boundaries which Barthes mandates must be done by any Text.

Those who deal with Arthur claim that the Arthurian has been revived in a self-consistent and self-referential mode. The "most significant "return" of Arthur has been not in particular accounts of his second coming but in the revitalization of the entire body of Arthurian material." That revival is due to this intertextuality and this particular characteristic of the Text – that it lacks closure.[76]

Indeed, each part of the greater Text – each constituent work – is held with a certain degree of intertextuality, according to Barthes. Each individual is

> "the text-between of another text … not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas."[77]

It does not have to conform to the work of a single author. In fact, Barthes mentions in an aside, "the '*droit d'auteur*' or copyright', (is) in fact of recent date since it was only really legalized at the time of the French Revolution."[78]

The earliest stories of Arthur followed in this author-less tradition. The earliest stories of a figure we now would recognize as King Arthur were passed orally, in a folk tradition. No one owned the stories – they were communal property, free to be altered slightly by anyone:

> "Many scholars, including D.K. Crowne, have proposed the idea that the poem was passed down from recitation to recitation under the theory of Oral-Formulaic Composition, which hypothesizes that epic poems were (at least to some extent) improvised by whoever was reciting them."[79]

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[76] Stephen R. Reimer and Raymond H. Thompson. "Legend of Arthur's Return." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[77] Ibid, 160

[78] Ibid, 161

[79] Albert Lord. The Singer of Tales. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960. pp. 200

Whereas the work is understood to be traceable to a source (through a process of derivation or "filiation"), the Text is without a source – the "author" is a mere "guest" at the reading of the text.[80] The Text "reads without the inscription of the Father" or the Auteur. The Arthurian Text demonstrates this in the academic wars that have been fought over just who the "historical" King Arthur was, when as I will later demonstrate, there is no clear answer. It is rather the lack of clarity of that answer that informs most on the later literary development of the Text.[81]

This is a hallmark of the Arthurian tradition, which was started in the late 6th Century as Welsh oral tradition and only much later written down. Since then, many authors have had their hands in the Arthurian soup, and have each added their own flavors to it, but none have altered the basic tenets, which I will discuss later. Arthur has outlived all of these authors and has evolved on his own – as a Text – through an almost organic or biological process. It has taken on a life of its own separate from those who 'created' certain elements of the story. This is where the concept of social authorship enters, which, as I will argue, is integral to the similarities between the Arthurian tradition and contemporary comic book norms and cultural significance.

The work is a commodity – an object of consumption – like the single comic book or an edition of Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur. The Text narrows the distance between reading and writing by replacing this consumption with the free play of collaborative reading. The reader gains pleasure without separation from the Text – the reader is a part of it. This is where we get our pleasures from watching Robert Downey, Jr. zoom around Malibu in his sleek, hot-

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[80] Ibid, 161

[81] Ibid, 161

rod-red Iron Man suit, or seeing Brandon Routh's Superman break through the clouds and into the sun, as his red cape flutters in the wind. Comic book fans understand that because they have the power of the purse, they can pass judgment on how the custodians of their favorite properties are performing, and if talented enough, can even take over those custodians' jobs themselves. It is the resonance that Arthuriana and comic book superheroes have outside of the pages in that sense – they are not solely what is or has been drawn into comic book frames, but much, much more – that makes them unique, together.

Up to this point, I have been conscious to separate the terms "hero" and "superhero." Most would use the two terms interchangeably when talking about comic book characters, but the confusion begins when the discourse moves outside of the pages of comics.

Inspired by the title of the anthology Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman, here is a primer on what turns a heroic figure into a superhero, gleaned from Coogan's discussion of four specific requirements for a character to be given the mantle of superhero: Mission, Powers, Identity, and Costume.

The convention that Coogan labels as Mission is characterized by a "prosocial and selfless," pattern of action, "which means that his fight against evil must fit in with existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda." Keep in mind that the Mission convention is relative – it must adhere to the "professed mores of society." In this way, at the time that Captain America was first written, it was permissible to draw him fighting fanged and buck-toothed Japanese adversaries or ape-like Germans in a propagandistic mode. This particular convention comes first in Coogan's definition because without it, you hardly even have a heroic figure, much less a superhero. Without the Mission

convention, a superhero would be someone merely helpful in a crisis, a glory-seeker who uses his or her abilities for fame and fortune, or worse, a supervillain.[82]

Now, about those abilities. The second convention that Coogan describes is that the superhero must have superpowers, the "first real difference between Superman and his pulp and science fiction predecessors."[83] Usually, these include exaggerated strength, speed, and toughness compared to ordinary beings. Super powers can run a gamut from none (i.e. Batman, whose only real super power is wealth) to nearly all-powerful, like Superman. Because not all superheroes have what one would qualify as superpowers, this is a flexible convention. For instance, when Bucky Barnes agrees to take the mantle of Captain America after Steve Rogers' death, he must do so without the benefit of the Super Soldier Serum that gave Rogers his Olympic-class athletic ability, strength, and agility. Instead, he has the strength and agility of a normal individual who engages in constant and rigorous exercise. He does not have the muscles that will not cramp or the extra lung capacity that Rogers had. Yet, when he puts on the costume, straps on the shield, and stands for what Rogers believed in, he truly becomes a supherhero. The point is that Bucky is situated within the superhero genre, and within that genre, "specific superheroes can exist who do not fully demonstrate these … elements,"[84] simply because they are within that milieu, and are understood to operate in that world.

But first, he still has to put on the suit. To be a supherhero, you have to look the part, after all. First comes the Identity convention, which "comprises the codename and the costume,

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[82] Coogan, 30-31

[83] Ibid, 31-32

[84] Ibid, 39

with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename."[85] Coogan asserts that the Identity convention "most clearly marks the superhero" as different from heroic figures that came before. Some heroic characters like Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel had secret identities and codenames, but the problem with them is not that they do not possess superpowers (put some bat ears on Zorro and he might as well be a Hispanic Batman), but that their codenames do not "externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography." They don't let you know who they are. Zorro's name – Spanish for 'fox,' is not borne out by his all-black attire, his cape, or his caballero hat, nor does it really have anything to do with who the character is, save for his slippery nature. And in no way does Percy Blakeney look like his namesake – a little roadside flower – when he becomes the Scarlet Pimpernel, and conversely, the codename says absolutely nothing about Blakeney. On the other hand, Superman "is a super man who represents the best humanity can hope to achieve; his codename expresses his inner character."[86]

Along with a representative codename, a superhero needs a good costume. Like the codename, the costume must "emblematize the character's identity." This emblematization is keyed around two things: color and iconicity. Scott McCloud put forth a theory of "amplification through simplification" in his book, Understanding Comics. He argues that pictures vary in their levels of abstraction, from realistic photos to abstract cartoons. Moving from the former to the latter is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning.'"[87] Because early comic books were only drawn in simple shapes and colored with a limited palate, the color schemes for the heroes had to be simple. The fact that

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[85] Ibid, 32

[86] Ibid, 33

[87] Scott McCloud. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993. pp. 30.

they did not have to look exceedingly real meant that the superhero was placed in the world of form, of concepts.[88] A superhero's costume "removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume."[89] Chief among the costume, and its concept of iconicity and form, is what Coogan calls the chevron, the "costume insignia that superheroes employ … a more concise term than chest symbol, chest shield, insignia, icon, or any of the various terms used to indicate the iconic symbols that indicate superhero identities."[90] This is what makes a superhero a superhero – his logo, the one thing that can be sketched out in five minutes that immediately represents everything that character stands for. It is a superhero's coat of arms, sometimes very literally his shield, as in the case of Captain America.

The costume and the shield, in conjunction, symbolize everything that Steve Rogers accomplished. When Tony Stark, after the death of Steve Rogers, attempts to put Rogers old teammate on the Avengers, Clint Barton (the archer Hawkeye), into the suit, Barton eerily echoes the ideals that Rogers brought to the "flag" as the characters refer to the entire get-up. The young woman who took over the mantle of Hawkeye when Barton disappeared – a Young Avenger operating outside of the Super Human Registration Act – yells at Barton in Fallen Son #3: Bargaining: "The second you put on that uniform, it's a different argument. You might even look the part, but I never dressed up like Hawkeye. Even when he wore a headband and a skirt." Barton mutters, "Years later and people still make fun of the skirt." The young female Hawkeye, Kate Bishop, shoots back, "That's not HIS shield, right? I mean, that's got to be a copy.

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[88] McCloud, 41

[89] Coogan, 33

[90] Ibid, 254-5

Because if it's not … that's just … wrong."[91] Arthur became the king by pulling the sword from the stone, and after sixty years, Captain America's shield serves the same function. Only the true Captain can carry it, or he who is the true successor, which turns out not to be Barton, who gives it back to Stark because he can't dishonor the memory of his friend just because Stark is having a tough time dealing with loss. Eventually, Rogers does name a successor, posthumously. In a letter to Stark, he all but outright says that the shield should go to Barnes, who he believes is worthy to carry on the legacy.

That concept of Rogers legacy is a perfect segue to the last of my definitions: that of the moral code. Superheroes, the ones descended from Arthurian tradition in particular, have a characteristic code of ethics. Captain America's code is symbolized by the shield – in modern continuity (that is to say, after World War II), it is the only weapon that he uses, and the fact that the shield is a defensive implement is telling. His first resort as far as use of force is concerned is to subdue and to neutralize, not to kill.[92] One of the great hallmarks of the character is his pledge not to kill, but to find whenever possible diplomatic and non-lethal solutions to conflict. The moral code is the calling card of these types of superheroes, insofar as it guides their every action.

Superman's moral code is inherent in the character very early on. In Action Comics # 1, he is seen as deducing that a person on Death Row has been framed, and captures the conspirator behind the framing in order to convince the governor of the unnamed state to grant a last-minute reprieve. In his first Action Comics run, in fact, Superman takes an arms manufacturer to

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[91] Jeph Loeb (w), Leinil Yu (artist), Dave McCaig (colors/digital inks). "Bargaining." Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America #3 (Jun. 2007), Marvel Comics.

[92] Chuck Austen (w) and Jae Lee (a). "Ice." Captain America Vol. 4 #16 (Oct. 2003), Marvel Comics.

experience a war in South American being fought with his guns, gives a wife-beater some of his own medicine, and exposes a plot to fix a college football game. While Superman occasionally uses physical violence against normal human beings in these early stories, he later ardently refused to use his supreme physical gifts against normal human beings, because his powers became so great that one punch from Superman would likely kill whoever was on the receiving end. Therefore, instead of trying to take care of social ills with physical violence, Superman turned his attention to problems and foes that man could not defeat himself, and even then, vowed not to kill any life form he battled. This is no more evident than in his dealings with Batman, whose use of force is, to say the least, far less discriminating.

Chapter 2:
In the Fires of Britain: The Forging of a King

> "Arthur. Wherever I go on this wretched island, I hear your name. Always half-whispered, as if you were … a god."
> --Stellan Skarsgård, *King Arthur (2004)*

Children of the Gods

Much of the current scholarship done on comic book superheroes can be said to have been focused primarily around a single remark made by Superman creator Jerome Siegel. Siegel said that in creating the Man of Steel, "I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one."[93] While not all scholarship explicitly cites that particular quote, it has indeed stemmed from it. The trunk of the tree of superhero research indeed can be said to yet have a fork in it.

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[93] Ibid, 117

Since I am to undertake the task of putting a fork in that tree, I find it valuable to understand where that tree has been, in order to perhaps more clearly illustrate where it will go. To understand the future, as the saying goes, one must first understand the past. And to understand the past, here, one must understand the currently accepted forbearers of modern-day superheroes. The past informs the present, and the present gives relevance and meaning to the past, which itself has its own cache of meaning and significance which we are continually renegotiate to fit into our present. Without the past, the present has no significance, and without the present, the past has no reason to be recalled. The connection between the present and the past is key for the understanding of how Arthur informs on modern superheroes, and more significantly, how the relationship between the two informs a theory of historical transmission of the things in the air – the hearsay that text like Arthur become.

A good starting point for this, suggested by Siegel's quote, would be DC Comics' superhero Captain Marvel. In Whiz Comics #2, a newspaper boy, Billy Batson, is led down to a mysterious subway by a cloaked stranger (this was the 1940's, people, so young boys going off with strange men did not quite have the stigma that it does today, much less the homoerotic undertones). He is mystically transported to a great cave, along the wall of which stand totems representing men's seven deadly enemies: Pride, Envy, Greed, Hatred, Laziness, Selfishness, and Injustice. The old wizard, who dwells in this mysterious cave, offers young Batson a chance to become the Earth's mightiest mortal, and says that to become this hulking Captain Marvel, all Batson must do is shout the old wizard's name: Shazam! It is revealed that Shazam is in fact an acronym for the powers that Batson, in the form of Captain Marvel, will possess, powers that gesture at the heroic traditions that precede Arthur: S stands for the wisdom of King Solomon; H

stands for the strength of Hercules; A stands for the stamina of Atlas, who bore the world on his shoulders, much as many comic book superheroes do in abstract; Z stands for the power of Zeus, drawing a comparison – not unfounded – with the comic book superhero Thor, the Thunder God (in fact, in the landmark Marvel vs. DC crossover event, Captain Marvel, whose chevron is a bolt of lightning, battles Thor, but before they strike the first blows, they kneel and pray for the future of mankind as the universes continue to catastrophically collide).[94] A stands for the courage of Achilles, the great Greek hero of the Seige of Troy; and M stands for the speed of Mercury, the Messenger of the Gods.

These gods and heroes of old mentioned within the epithet of Captain Marvel are where I shall begin to fill out the superheroic family tree. It is perhaps easiest to start with some of the earliest heroic traditions gestured at by Marvel's cry: the Hellenistic tradition from which Alexander the Great drew his mythical power in the public eye.

As the progenitors of both Rome and of Britain – Aeneas and Brutus, respectively – emerged from the fires of a falling Ilium,[95] at least in the first "historical" treatment of the Arthur story, then it makes sense to start with the Trojan War – with the great warrior, Achilles.

The son of the sea nymph Thetis and the mortal king Peleus, Achilles was the most handsome and the quickest of the Greek heroes assembled to fight Troy.[96] Like Hercules and Alexander (at least according to the great conqueror's own propaganda), he is not of strictly earthly parentage. Just as Hercules was born of the union between a god and a mortal, and

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[94]Ron Marz (w), Peter David (w), Dan Jurgens (p), and Claudio Castelini (p). "The Showdown of the Century." Marvel vs. DC Vol. 1 #2 (Mar. 1996), Amalgam Comics. pp. 17.

[95] Geoffrey of Monmouth. Historia Regum Britanniae, Trans. Aaron Thompson and J.A. Giles (1842). Book 1, Chapter 3-18; Book 2, Chapter 1.

[96] Plato. *Symposium*. Sec. 180a.

Alexander promulgated the rumor that he was too the product of such a union, Achilles had one foot in the world of man, and one in the world of the divine or supernatural.

His fury and rage in battle were said to frighten even the gods themselves, as at times they were so great and powerful that they would allow him change the course of fate and bring the fall of Troy sooner than had been decreed, according to Homer's *Iliad*. His armor, forged after the death of his male lover Patroclus, was created by the god Hephaestus at the urging of Achilles' mother. Homer in particular describes the circular Shield of Achilles (evocative now of Captain America's discus-shaped implement) in great detail in Book 18, lines 468-607.[97]

Alexander the Great, whose mother Olympia was descended from the kings of Epirus, claimed to be, through his mother, in turn descended from Achilles through the hero's son.

But the key characteristics of the great Greek hero were his speed, his stamina, his strength, his rage, and his pride, for it is because of his pride that the gods decree that he should perish. Achilles was petty and argumentative, and refused to take the field with his Myrmidons after feeling slighted by Agamemnon, the general of the Greek host. It is only after his friend/lover Patroclus is slain by the Trojan hero Hector that Achilles re-enters the fight and nearly wins the war single-handedly.[98]

In varying traditions, Achilles is depicted as alternately mortal and immortal. In an incomplete first-century C.E. poem, *Achilleis*, by Statius, Achilles gains invulnerability when his mother dips him in the waters of the River Styx, but she forgets to wet his famous heel, thereby providing his one weakness. However, no sources before Statius refer to Achilles' otherwise-

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[97] Homer. The Iliad. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

[98] Ibid, Book 21

invulnerable nature or the weak heel, and it is nowhere mentioned in Homer's Iliad. In fact, Homer mentions, in Book 21 of the epic, that Asteropaeus, a Paeonian hero, wounds Achilles' elbow with a spear sometime before his demise.[99] The concept of Achilles' heel is a late addition to the tale, but it has nevertheless become an integral part of it, much as the story of Sir Lancelot was a relatively late addition to the Arthur mythos, and yet has become synonymous with it.

Rather than his heel being Achilles' great weakness, in the earliest works, it is his pride that spells his doom. He is a flawed hero, one that sets a precedent for later heroes in that regard.[100]

Yet another flawed hero in the Hellenistic tradition is the great Herakles, or Hercules; the strongman who partly influenced the super-strength of later heroes like Superman was a notorious liver-of-life. Hercules was the son of Zeus and Alcmene, who was the granddaughter of Perseus. Before Hercules was born, his father swore that the next son born of the Perseid house would become ruler of Greece, but Zeus's wife Hera felt otherwise, and sent two serpents to kill the boy in his cradle, which he later strangled with his prodigious strength. His appetites for food and drink were as large as his muscles, and he was, to say the least, morally ambiguous, as he was often given to fits of destructive rage.[101]

But both Hercules and Achilles were mere mortals compared to the divine parentage from which they sprang. So, why, one might ask, are the great Greco-Roman gods not the influences for modern superheroes? They do many of the same things as their progeny, Hercules and

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[99] Ibid, Book 21, ll. 200-202.

[100] Manuel Duran and Fay R. Rogg. Fighting Windmills: Encounters With Don Quixote. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006. pp. 67.

[101] "Heracles." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 4 May 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9040091>.

Achilles, and are nigh invulnerable, a trait we have come to expect from superheroes like Superman and Captain Marvel. But in fact it is in that invulnerability that they fail as heroic models. No god of Greece could be heroic because they were immortal and invincible. They could not defy danger.[102] Hercules and Achilles could because they were half-mortal. So when we speak of ancient or classical heroes, it is not to speak of the gods (even poor Mercury, whose winged helmet and heels inspired DC's The Flash and Marvel's Namor the Sub-Mariner, respectively), despite what some comic book villains have to say about it.[103] Heroes, and superheroes, are those characters who can defy possibility of mortal danger. Hercules and Achilles could defy danger as well, but they crucially lacked a prosocial Mission. They are largely out for themselves and are merely heroic figures

So, if the Greek gods could not qualify as heroes, what about other deities? For an example of a god that was heroic, we turn to the mighty Thor, who has once again ascended to popularity thanks to his appearance in comic books as one of the most recognizable heroes of the Marvel Universe.

Thor was worshiped widely by early Germanic peoples and in Scandinavia, he was in fact worshiped more than his father, Odin. By many accounts, he was the most powerful of the Scandinavian and Germanic gods. So how is this seemingly all-powerful thunder god considered heroic? Because of the concept of Ragnarök, in Norse, the "Doom of the Gods." Thor is said to battle Jörmungand, the world serpent and the symbol of evil, at the time of Ragnarök because he

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[102] Hamilton, 322

[103] In 2006's "Superman Returns", Kevin Spacey's Lex Luthor tells of the history of Prometheus, whose gift of fire sparked the development of technology. When his consort, Kitty Kowalsky, responds to the supervillain's master plot backed by the narrative of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, she says, "Sounds great Lex, but you're not a god." Luther replies, "Gods are selfish beings who fly around in little red capes and don't share their powers with mankind."

failed to fully smash the creature's skull in their first encounter. Because of the concept that the gods can die, and that Thor could not completely destroy his great enemy, he has mortality and he has flaws.[104]

Thor's most enduring symbol is his hammer, Mjolnir, forged out of a mystical metal by elves. It is the indestructible symbol of his power and he uses it on several occasions to hallow certain objects and people.[105] Sound familiar? It should, because each of those attributes have been attributed to the sword Excalibur – it is forged on the mystical island of Avalon, it is indestructible, and it is used to show favor, such as in a ceremony of knighting.

Like Hercules and Achilles before him, Thor is also of divine lineage. Nigh immortal, but not completely. The problem thus far with tracing modern superheroes directly to these early Norse and Greco-Roman heroic traditions has been that none of these aforementioned heroes are more than half human. But what about Siegel's other father figure for the character of Superman, the Hebrew strongman Samson?

The Israelite judge gained his power from up above, though he was not of divine lineage. He possessed no such pedigree as Hercules, Achilles, or Thor, but was rather a Nazarite, one set aside for God "by a vow to abstain from strong drink, from shaving or cutting the hair, and from contact with a dead body."[106] Because of this vow, he was gifted with tremendous physical strength, allowing him to kill a lion with his bare hands. But like Hercules and Achilles, he was less than morally upright. He broke his vow several times over when he feasted with a gentile,

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[104] "Thor." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 1 May 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9072221>.

[105] "Mjollnir." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 1 May 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9053090>.

[106] "Samson." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 1 May 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9065239>.

solicited a prostitute, and when drunk, revealed the secret of his strength (his uncut hair) to the treacherous Delilah.[107]

Like Achilles' unfortunate heel in later redactions of the Achilles myth, Samson had the 'one weakness,' a tradition that would follow Superman (Kryptonite) and the Green Lantern (originally, wooden objects were immune to the ring's power, and then later it was altered to be ineffective on yellow objects). Samson is one of the last of the progressively more and more ineffectual Judges. Because of his failure, the people of Israel clamor for a king, like the nations around them. God reluctantly grants their wish, having wanted them to remain separate and distinct from the gentile peoples surrounding them. The final Judge, Samuel, anoints Saul, the handsome and charismatic son of Kish, as Israel's first king.[108]

These heroic figures (not heroes, mind you, but heroic figures), up until the naming of the King of Israel, constitute the earliest antecedents of superheroes. As Coogan said in his book, Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre:

> "These mythological and legendary heroes provide the deep background, roots, and prototypes for the superhero. Sometimes they offer immediate inspiration to the creators, as with Samson … other times, they merely serve as a version of the "collective unconscious" – the background we all carry with us because of the way characters, motifs, and plot dynamics provide the models of character and narrative that authors draw on intentionally or unintentionally."[109]

So in what Coogan calls the superheroic pre-history, we have immortal gods who cannot be heroic and morally imperfect hybrids. How can these figures possibly serve as antecedents to comic book superheroes, who are, by definition heroic and have staunch pro-social moral codes?

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[107] Judges 14:17

[108] I Samuel 8, 10:17–27, and 12

[109] Coogan, 124-5

Coogan's explanation is incomplete. He jumps from the divine heroes straight to models that lay at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. He makes no effort to fill in the gaping historical and conceptual gap between morally flawed heroic prototypes and the final stage of superheroic development. The answer lies not on Mount Olympus or in Asgard, but in the world of men immediately following the emergence of these early godlike figures.

The Age of Kings

As heroic texts progressed temporally, the emphasis shifted from fantastic stories of gods and their familiars to the stories of men, who did not have divine blood flowing through their veins. But the transition was not quite complete. There was still divinity and the sense of the supernatural involved, but it was more covert. Kings were set as gods amongst men, who ruled by the will of God. But they were still just men. These were not the great gods of Olympus, or men imbued with divine gifts from the Hebrew God, but rather men of flesh and blood. They were tempted by vice and greed, as the previous heroic characters were, but unlike them, human heroes could be injured, bleed, and yes, die. There was still an implicit connection to the divine, but it was ancillary, not hereditary; it was through faith that some accomplished great supernatural feats (i.e. Arthur, who carried an image of the Virgin Mary upon his shield).[110]

Some claimed divine heritage (I'm looking at you, Alexander), but that was in large part due to their own propaganda.[111] According to five historians of antiquity, (Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, Justin, and Plutarch), after Alexander's father, Philip II of Macedon, visited the Oracle

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[110] Historia, Book IX, Ch. 1; Earlier sources use "shoulder" instead of "shield". In the *Annales Cambriae* and Nennius's Historia Brittonum (800 C.E.), the word used is the Welsh *ysqwyd*, which means shoulder. Confusion probably arose in the translation from the original Welsh to Geoffrey's Latin because of the linguistic proximity to the Welsh word for shield, which is *ysqwyt*.

[111] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 < http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t32.html>.

of Ammon at Siwa, rumors began to spread that the Oracle revealed Alexander's true father to be Zeus. In support of this, Plutarch, in his work on Alexander (Alexander 3.1, 3 to be exact), claimed that Philip avoided his wife Olympia's bed because of her affinity for sleeping in the company of snakes.[112]

Others, like King David, were purported to have been anointed by a prophet of God.[113] After the prophet Samuel anoints the young shepherd boy, he brings him to the ailing King Saul, whose madness is soothed by the boy's skillful lyre plucking. In a second origin story, to borrow a phrase from comic books, David first encounters Saul when he brings supplies to his older brothers, who are fighting in Saul's army against the Philistines and their greatest weapon: the giant Goliath. In the second narrative, David is described as "the youngest,"[114] not yet old enough to follow his three older brothers into battle. Since he is not yet a man, or at least of the age of service in the Israelite military, it must be assumed that he has yet to reach the Jewish age of manhood, 13 years old.

One way or the other, David ends up serving Saul as a great military commander, gaining popularity for his remarkable victory as but a boy and for continued success on the battlefield through his teens and early twenties. It is said that "David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul sent him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved."[115] Before long, the boy had become a fearsome warrior, even out-pacing his

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[112] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html >.

[113] I Samuel 16:1

[114] Ibid 17:14

[115] Ibid 18:5

king in popularity, as the people began to sing, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands."[116]

Saul, aware that because of transgressions against the Hebrew faith, God had lost favor in him, saw the emergence of David as a threat. The boy who slew the giant was now the warrior who would take the throne of Israel. Saul became paranoid of David, and declared him an outlaw. Through some not-quite-kosher machinations, well-timed assassinations, and deft military planning and showmanship, including a little guerilla warfare, David eventually ascended to the throne, becoming the King of Judah by age 30 (seven and a half years before he conquers the remnants of Saul's dynasty).[117]

But the divine Presence leaves David after a time, when the blood on his hands is so thick, he cannot be the vessel through which God builds the Temple.[118] Here enters the historical, or at least the closest approximation to what the "real" King David was like. David's history is given in two parts – one consisting of an official "court history," in which the Boy King's praises are sung and he can do no wrong – and the other consisting of David's downfall, including murder, jealousy, and the killing of David's son at his own hand.[119] Like the King Arthur of later Arthurian romance, David is undone in part by adultery, though it is he who commits it. The once-innocent shepherd boy sees a beautiful woman bathing on her rooftop from the elevated height of his palace, and commands she be brought to him, and he forces

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[116] Ibid 18:7

[117] Jonathan Kirsch. King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000. pp. 135.

[118] 2 Samuel 6

[119] David appears distraught at his son's death in 2 Samuel 18:33 in spite of the political advantages it brings. However, he appears similarly so at the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1.11-27) and Abner (3:31-39), all of which served to politically benefit him. To paraphrase Prof. Goldsmith, if King David is writing a song about you, you'd better start running.

himself upon her, and she becomes pregnant. The woman, Bathsheba, is married to one of David's greatest generals, Uriah the Hittite. Despite the religious differences, Uriah is doggedly loyal to his king, even going so far as to sleep on the palace doorstep. Because Uriah would not sleep at home and lay with his wife as David commanded (so as to conceal the king's wrongdoing), David sends him off to die in battle.[120] In a mirror of the Arthur-Lancelot storyline, it is the king who transgresses, not the loyal vassal.

The one thing that remains consistent between the court history and the so-called succession narrative, or inside history, is that David is a formidable warrior, earning victory after victory and expanding the Israelite kingdom to its greatest territorial extent.[121] He was the great hope, the ideal king, and, as UC Berkeley professor Steve Goldsmith said in a Bible as Literature lecture on Feb. 26, 2007, the unity that Israel reputedly experienced under David "may be something like Camelot in the Arthur legend."[122]

Like Arthur, he originates as an Outsider, perhaps even more so given the fact that he is declared an outlaw. Like Arthur, he rises to prominence because of his skill with the blade, and his ability to fight. His legacy of conquest would be passed down to the next great warrior who conquered that part of the world. A little more than 500 years after David reigned,[123] the Boy King of Macedonia would burst upon the stage and conquer not only Judea, but the rest of the known world.

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[120] 2 Samuel 11:1-21

[121] The New Oxford Annotated Bible. 3rd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 453.

[122] Prof. Steven Goldsmith. "How Israel Came to Have a Monarchy." English C107: The English Bible as Literature. University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Feb. 26, 2007.

[123] Prof. Steven Goldsmith. "Kings and Messengers." English C107: The English Bible as Literature. University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Mar. 14, 2007.

The historical Alexander the Great, born in 356 B.C.E., had a great task left to him after his father, Philip II of Macedon, was murdered at the point of his own guard's dagger. The first task was to keep a knife of his own under his pillow.[124] The next? Conquer the world.

By the age of 18, Philip had been confirmed by the heads of the Greek city states as the great hegemon of the region, after defeating them in the Battle of Chaeronea, a battle in which his son Alexander commanded a crucial cavalry charge. In the fall of 338, Philip forms the League of Corinth to unite the Greek city-states, with an eye towards an all-out invasion of Persia.[125] By age 20, Alexander ascends to the throne to which his father was elected, the throne of Macedonia, after Philip is assassinated.[126] The several Greek kings that had, under Phillip, been members of the League of Corinth, rebelled against the newly-crowned boy king, and before ever embarking on another military campaign, Alexander had to reign in the reticent monarchs and reconstitute the original League to display his worthiness to rule in his father's place.[127] Like King David who unified the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and Arthur, who united the British (Welsh), Scots, and Picts,[128] Alexander was destined to unite the Mediterranean world under a single banner – his own.

But the young conqueror was like a shooting star – he burned intensely for a while, but soon flamed out. In the spring of 323 B.C.E., Alexander was warned by Babylonian astronomers

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[124] Plutarch. "Alexander." Trans. John Dryden. The Internet Classics Archive. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 1 May 2008 <http://classics.mit.edu//Plutarch/alexandr.html>.

[125] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>.

[126] Ibid

[127] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander02.html>.

[128] Historia, Book IX, Ch. VI.

not to enter the city of Babylon, where his navy and his army were gathering for an Arabian expedition. The seers foretold his death should he enter the city. Alexander dismissed their warnings, and by the end of May, he fell ill. On June 11, he died, leaving his empire in utter chaos, and without a ruler. Alexander's brother Arridaeus succeeded him for a short time, but as soon as Alexander's last breath was exhaled, his generals began to feud over their respective territories. Before Arridaeus could reign in his brothers commanders, they had torn Alexander's conquests apart. Not even the birth of Alexander's son by his wife Roxane, just weeks after his death, could stop the inevitable civil war between the great conqueror's officers.[129]

Alexander was more of a general than he was a statesman. For ten years, he led armies to conquer whatever land he could see. His legacy was not that of government, but of battle. It was his reluctance to accept his mortality and to establish some concrete form of succession that doomed his legacy. His downfall, then, was pride. With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that Alexander's greatest hero was Achilles.

When Alexander crossed into Asia, Plutarch reports that he landed at Ilion, the site of the mythical Troy. He sacrificed animals to Athena and made dedications to the heroes. He then adorned with wreaths the sepulchral column of Achilles, after having anointed himself beneath it, and holds naked running races to honor the dead. Why did Alexander do this? It couldn't be mere hero worship, could it? With photo-ops and political correspondents still centuries away, this wasn't a public-relations move. If this was hero worship, how could Alexander be so sure that Achilles ever even lived? All he knew of the man was from stories told long after the Trojan War was purported to have occurred. Was he foolishly showing "an honourable veneration for

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[129] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander00c.html>.

something that is a figment of the imagination"?[130] Perhaps. But perhaps Alexander was participating in a tradition that extends across time and cultures, all the way to places like San Diego, Calif. (the annual home of Comic Con International), Edinburgh, Scotland (a main geological feature of which is called Arthur's Seat), and Las Vegas, Nev., home of the Excalibur Hotel and Casino. Perhaps, what really happened doesn't really matter. What matters, and what we remember, are the stories. Jan De Vries, one of the most respected figures in German philology, said of Alexander's display at Ilion, and the question of whether or not the conqueror thought the stories of Achilles and of Troy were real:

> "These are indeed questions that Alexander could not have answered and which would have seemed to him entirely senseless. But they are questions that we can raise only to our own shame. Reality is not what happened more than two thousand years ago in the Scamander plain, but what has lived for centuries in the memories of many generations as a precious testimony to a glorious past, and – even more important – from which these generations have come to life."[131]

For out of the ashes of that same famed Ilium came the blood of an even greater warrior, an even greater king, an even more prodigious slayer of giants: Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur, descended from Brutus of Troy. On his voyage to find a new home after the fall of Troy, Brutus asks a statue of the Greek goddess Diana the following:

> *Diva potents nemorum, terror sylvestribus apris;*
> *Cui licet amfractus ire æthereos,*
> *Infernasque domos; terrestria jura resolve,*
> *Et dic quas terras nos habitare velis?*
> *Dic certam sedem qua te venerabor in ævum,*
> *Qua tibi virgineis templa dicabo choris!*
>
> (Goddess of woods, tremendous in the chase
> To mountain board, and all the savage race!

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[130] Jan de Vries. Heroic Song and Heroic Legend. Trans. B. J. Timmer. New York: Arno Press, 1978. pp. 81

[131] Ibid 181-182

> Wide o'er the ethereal walks extend thy sway,
> And o'er the infernal mansions void of day!
> Look upon us on earth! unfold our fate,
> And say what region is our destines seat?
> Where shall we next thy lasting temples raise?
> And choirs of virgins celebrate thy praise?)[132]

After devotional offerings, Brutus falls asleep for three to four hours. As he slumbers, an apparition of the goddess appears before him, and foretells the rise of a great empire, and a legendary royal line:

> *Brute! sub accasum solis trans Gallica regna*
> *Insula in oceano est undique clausa mari:*
> *Insula in oceano est habitata gigantibus olim,*
> *Nunc deserta quidem, gentibus apta tuis.*
> *Hanc pete, namque tibi sedes erit illa perennis:*
> *Sic fiet natis altera Troja tuis.*
> *Sic de prole tua reges nascentur: et ipsis*
> *Totius terræ subditus orbus erit.*
>
> (Brutus! there lies beyond the Gallic bounds
> An island which the western sea surrounds,
> By giants once possessed, now few remain
> To bar thy entrance, or obstruct thy reign.
> To reach that happy shore thy sails employ
> There fate decrees to raise a second Troy
> And found an empire in thy royal line,
> Which time shall ne'er destroy, nor bounds confine.)[133]

Brutus and his retinue land on the western side of a wild, untamed island inhabited by giants. He settles there and names the place Britannia, after, well, himself. The people of the western side of the island would hereafter be called British, and speak in the British tongue, not Greek or Trojan, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth. After some of the native giants make

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[132] Historia, Book I, Ch. XI

[133] Ibid Book I, Ch. XI

inroads against Brutus' settlement, he slaughters them, prefiguring his descendant's giant-slaying ways.[134] In the Auchinleck, just like Dear Ole' Gran-Pap, Arthur keeps hacking away at giant-sized inhabitants of the island, such as King Guifas, who was "sexten fet o length."[135] During a battle to save Leodegrans, Arthur faces the heathen kings "sornegrex & Saphiran, / Aither of hem was xiiii fot lang" and slays them, much to Guinevere's delight, who watches as her future husband – unbeknownst to either of them – saves her father from certain defeat. In the final skirmish of that battle, Arthur cleaves the giant Randoil "with his swerd that wele bot / thurthout hauberk & aketoun / To the midel al adoun."[136]

With a kingdom and a line ordained by the gods, it would seem, and a pedigree of giant-slaying, the future High King shares at least that much in common with David and Alexander. But as I have established earlier, the similarities go much further than that. Arthur, conceived with the help of a concealment spell cast by Merlin on Uther Pendragon,[137] is spirited away by the wizard soon after his birth, destined to be a squire to Sir Kay until he unsheathes Excalibur from its rocky prison in Robert de Boron's *Merlin* (ca. 1200) as a squire – a young man between 12 and 17 years old.[138] As a boy, he should not be able to fight, but like David, he proves that he can. When deemed too young by his ally King Ban in the Auchinleck, Arthur, his blood boiling, spurs his horse forward to deal with the enemy king, Saphiran.[139]

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[134] Ibid, Book I, Ch. XVI

[135] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 7448

[136] Ibid. ll. 6413-6414

[137] Historia, Book VIII, Ch. XIX

[138] Norris J. Lacy. "Merlin." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[139]Auchinleck MS, ll. 6335-6374

As an illegitimate child, he must establish credibility and instill confidence once he ascends to the throne, like Alexander. Like both of the previous kings, Arthur unifies a fractured nation, bringing together the Welsh, the Scots, and the Picts.[140] But while Arthur inherits these traditions from what the editors of the Auchinleck type as prefigurations of him, he becomes something more. The Auchinleck, by placing these three kings together, with Arthur at the center of the compilation, forces a reading of the trio as a unit, given their remarkably similar character biographies and the sharing of the four roles of Boy King, Warrior King, Giant Slayer, and Outsider, the roots of which were already well-established in Arthurian lore by the time the manuscript was compiled. By including the two other kings with Arthur, the Auchinleck becomes a formation of John Byrne's Man of Steel, the re-boot to DC Comics' Superman franchise.

Think of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia as Action Comics #1. It gives us Arthur, it gives us his lineage, it gives us some of the major aspects of the Arthur story, but it doesn't have some of the things that we today consider major parts of the Arthurian mythos, such as the Sword in the Stone (though it does have Caliburnus, later renamed Excalibur), the Grail Quest, and the Lancelot/Guinevere storyline. Similarly, Action Comics #1 presents us with Superman, a snippet of his backstory, and an embryonic version of the powers that we have come to associate with him, yet the Last Son of Krypton was not yet able to fly, was not yet said to have been raised in Smallville, Kansas, was not vulnerable to anything but "a bursting shell,"[141] and had not met the diabolical Lex Luthor. Only later were these things added, along with other, less endearing

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[140] Historia, Book IX, Ch. VI

[141] Action Comics #1

concepts, such as multi-colored Kryptonite, parallel universes, an adolescent version of Superman known as Superboy, a menagerie of super-powered animals like Beppo the Super-Chimp, and a brief career as a television journalist.

But like Arthur, Superman also had elements of his story created along the way to final "canonization" that began to stick, such as his parents Jon and Martha Kent, his childhood love interest Lana Lang, his aversion to radioactive green Kryptonite, and his ability not only to leap, but to truly fly. The foes that both Arthur and Superman fought, over time, became larger and larger, both figuratively and literally. Arthur leads an army to the gates of Rome, in some stories, and in the Auchinleck fights non-English foes 20 feet tall, not, as Geoffrey wrote, the invading Saxons, who, while imposing, were still just men. Despite being halted at the Battle of Mount Badon by a force of united native peoples,[142] the Saxons did eventually conquer Britannia, and over time, came to be known as the English, as opposed to the Welsh Britons. In turn, over time, Arthur goes from fighting the progenitors of the English to fighting Danes and the Irish in the pages of the Auchinleck. Superman goes from righting social wrongs and giving wife-beaters a taste of their own medicine to fighting alien supercomputers.

To understand exactly how I am reading the Auchinleck in light of this project, one may find it useful here to have a primer on Byrne's re-boot of DC Comics' flagship property. In the early 1980's, the DC Comics universe had become so convoluted and cluttered (seriously, a Super-Chimp?) that much of the continuity had, for lack of a better term, the clarity of mud. In order to wipe away the myriad parallel earths, parallel universes, and alternate timelines, the company published an event called the *Crisis*. Following the event, all of the heroes were

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[142] Geoffrey Ash. "Badon." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

revamped and cleaned up so that their continuities would be easier to write and to understand. The origins went back to the roots of the respective heroes and found what was elemental about the characters. Such was the case with the re-launch of the Superman title.[143]

One of the big contributors to this re-launch, unwittingly, was Donner, the director of the 1978 *Superman* film. His depiction of a cold and alien Krypton – a planet that Superman could not miss and therefore come to resent Earth – was markedly different than the warm, inviting planet originally introduced decades prior. This depiction of Krypton was and still is a hallmark of the character – it made readers remember why Superman was Superman. While his alien heritage gave him his tremendous physical gifts, it was his childhood and young adulthood on Earth that made him into the person that he was. On page 22 of Man of Steel #4, Byrne pens this interior monologue for Superman: "I may have been conceived out there in the endless depths of space, but I was born when the rocket opened, on Earth, in America. I'll cherish always the memories Jor-El and Lara gave me, but only as curious mementos of a life that might have been. Krypton bred me, but it was Earth that gave me all that I am. All that matters. It was Krypton that made me Superman, but it was the Earth that makes me human!!"

Similarly, the Auchinleck gets rid of all of the foreign traditions that had accumulated around Arthur and reduces the story to its essential elements, and those elements are best seen in the two kings that are located very close to the Arthur narrative, kings who became typed by the editors of the Auchinleck as pre-figuration of Arthur. Recall that the manuscript has been dated to 1330. Why is this date significant? Because by 1330, nearly the entire Arthurian canon had been established, including the French redactions immediately following the release of Historia.

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[143] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:37:11.

Significantly, at the time the Auchinleck was compiled, the Norman French influence was already fading in England.

At this point, it is useful to establish what the chronological history of Arthur was up to the point of the collection of the Auchinleck. It is important to recognize that Arthur's literary and historical chronology are deeply intertwined. His expressions in various forms necessarily stem from the earliest oral histories surrounding the man (or men) we now call King Arthur. The difficulty begins, of course, with the fact that there is no surviving relic, no rusted blade hoisted up from beneath the surface of a placid Welsh lake, bearing the inscription "Excalibur." We do not have the body, as it were, despite Malory's closing lines in Le Morte d'Arthur, and the claim of a leaden cross tombstone and two skeletons (presumably Arthur and Guinevere) unearthed at Glastonbury.[144] All we have are snippets of works referring to Arthur ranging from the 5th and 6th centuries until Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britannia was written in the early 12th century. Of course, the problem with using Historia is that Geoffrey himself cites a mysterious lost book, presented to him by Walter, the Archdeacon of Gloucester, as his primary source for the work, and that volume has yet to be uncovered in the nearly nine centuries since Geoffrey wrote. But we do have some tantalizing clues, including the very title that Geoffrey uses. His choice to use the word Britannia does not carry the associations that many modern readers associate with the word 'Britain.' More specifically, then and now, the correct meaning of the word 'Britain' and its associated cognates, is in reference to Wales, not a synonym for England, the "United Kingdom," or "Great Britain."

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[144] Geoffrey Ash. "Glastonbury." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

In 410 C.E., the Roman Empire begins to withdraw from indefensible outposts, one of which being the isle of Britannia, explained by Geoffrey as the inheritance of the Trojan, Brutus. In fact, for a time, the English (descended from the Saxons) referred to the western regions of the island as Brutal Britain, to mock the "uncivilized" and "beastly" people of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, who in reality were the originators of the mythology that grew to become Arthurian lore. Garrisons abandoned the once-mighty Hadrian's Wall and retreated to Rome. At least, most of them did. As the Romans withdrew their native sons, the sons of mixed parentage (Romano-Briton) or of conquered peoples, such as the Sarmatians (originally from the Baltic region), likely stayed behind and integrated into the native cultures. But close on the heels of the Roman retreat, Saxon invaders came to claim the island. Geoffrey of Monmouth writes – perhaps rather accurately – the retreating Romans had left the indigenous people to their own devices, essentially defenseless against whatever force may come. At some time during this upheaval, the Saxon advance was halted by a mysterious British warrior, sometime around 500 C.E. Perhaps the Romans had left more than just "patterns of their arms,"[145] (a possible origin for the Roman *spatha* cavalry sword that would later gain gilded fame). In this same period of time, Brittany, on the coast of France, is colonized by British refugees from the Saxon invasion, and in 468, the "King of Britons" crosses into Gaul, the Roman province now known as France.[146]

The very first mention of a figure that resembles the King Arthur of literature that would be recognizable to modern readers comes from the vitriolic writer Gildas, who wrote *De Excidio*

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[145] Historia, Book VI, Ch. 3

[146] Geoffrey Ash. "Arthur, Origins of Legend." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

Britanniae (*On the Ruin of Britain)*, between 520 and 560 C.E.[147] Gildas' account is the source for the idea that the historical Arthur was the victorious commander at the Battle of Badon Hill, a now-canonical requirement for any contender for the crown of "historical Arthur". The man named in Gildas' account is one Ambrosius Aurelianus, represented as the savior of the island from the Saxon incursion, and the "only true Roman" left. In fact, ten years after Gildas writes, the Roman-sounding name "Artorius" undergoes a revival of popularity, as witnessed in contemporary documents, but more on Artorius later.[148] In any event, Gildas is a Briton, writing on the eventual fall of Britain (Wales) to the Saxons, and often laments the cowardice displayed by fellow Britons in battle, comparing it unfavorably to the exploits of Aurelianus. Other records from the period compare valiant warriors to Arthur, but do not elaborate.

The first mention of the name Arthur is an oblique one, coming from the seventh-century Welsh poem, *Y Gododdin*. In that poem, composed in Old Welsh, 80 such warriors are praised for their deeds in the battle at Catraeth in 600 C.E. One of those warriors is lauded for fighting bravely, "even though he was no Arthur." This is the very first extant reference to Arthur by name. In Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, written in 800 C.E., the first text to mention Arthur as a *dux bellorum*, or 'general,' Arthur is already credited as singlehandedly slaying 960 foes, indicating that at this early juncture, the figure of King Arthur was already legendary.[149]

From the 7th through the 11th centuries, stories about Arthur and Merlin had begun to enter the oral tradition (hence the already reverential tones in which Arthur is mentioned in early references), particularly in the so-called Celtic Fringe (Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany). Tales are

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[147] Richard Barber, The Figure of Arthur. London: Longman, 1972. pp. 39-53.

[148] Geoffrey Ash. "Arthur, Origins of Legend." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[149] Ibid

circulated to the continent by Breton storytellers, sowing the seeds for the eventual French versions of the Arthur story.

Sources such as these – mostly Welsh – are the building blocks upon which Geoffrey based his *Historia* narrative. In fact, it is primarily the Welsh tradition from which Geoffrey draws a good deal of his source material, and he "undoubtedly had access to Welsh insular traditions – written, oral, or more likely both"[150] and that when he does cite the mysterious lost book as his source text, he uses the term "ex Britannia," which has come to be translated as "from Britannia," or "out of Wales."[151] Arthur appears first, then, in primarily the Welsh language or in Latin or in Celtic written by Welshmen.

The Welsh Triads, a series of tales dating from the early 11th century, which preserve fragments of earlier Welsh folklore and mythology and refer to Arthur and other semi-historical characters from sub-Roman Britain, reference a weapon called Caledvwlch, specifically in the story *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The name of the sword roughly translates to 'hard-cleft' and it is said to be a gift from God (website in binder). This early version of Arthur's sword, which contains the root of all of its future names – "-cal-" – bears many similarities to a magical sword of Irish myth, called Caladchold ('hard-dinter') borne by several Irish kings. When borne by Fearhus mac Roich, the sword, when swung around the bearer, slays the enemies surrounding him. In *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Caledvwlch plays copycat: "Llenlleawn the Irishman seized Caledvwlch, swung it round in a circle and killed Diwnach the Irishman and his entire retinue."[152]

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[150] Steve Blake. Pendragon: The Definitive Account of the Origins of Arthur. London: Samuel French, 2002 pp. 37

[151] Barber, 38

[152] The Mabinogion, Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin, 1976. pp. 170.

The early dates of the Welsh evidence, and their use as sources for Geoffrey's work, point toward a Welsh historical Arthur figure, likely Gildas' Aurelianus. But if it was that man, how do we come by the name Arthur? And how does Arthur come to be linked to the *Mabinogion*'s Caledvwlch? And why care about a sword in the first place? In Nennius' Historia Brittonum, the mention of Arthur as a *dux bellorum* (battle lord), hints at perhaps a different purpose for the name "Arthur" than as just a simple given name. Perhaps, like the names of superheroes, it was a nom de guerre. In Welsh, the root of the name Arthur, "arth," means "the Bear," which, like *dux bellorum*, is likely an honorary title, given to a chieftain.[153] In Latin, "arto," a possible root for the Roman "Artorius," means "to press together" or "abridged," giving us perhaps another clue as to the true nature of the name of the mysterious warrior king.

It is highly likely that the name Arthur was in fact a title, passed down from generation to generation of Welsh warrior chieftains (hence, the 'press together') who became conflated in later lore, and because of their consistent title, Arthur, came to be combined into a single man, the personage that we now know as King Arthur. If this holds true, then Excalibur, or at least its historical antecedent, would have been a richly adorned weapon that served as a mark of office, declaring its bearer the ruler or commander. In fact, this tradition resurfaces in the later retellings of the Arthur story, most famously in Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, where a young Arthur pulls a sword (in some iterations this is Excalibur, in others it is not) from a stone, thereby passing the test of kingship. But there remains a problem – why would a native Welsh warrior chieftain be referred to by a Roman title, such as *dux bellorum* or Artorius? If he were Welsh, he would likely have been subjugated to the Romans, not a leader of them. At the most, he would have

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[153] Geoffrey Ash. "Arthur, Origins of Legend." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

been a child of a Roman commander and a British native, not Gildas' "last true Roman." These difficulties would seem to sink the possibility of Aurelianus as an historical Arthur. However, they do raise yet another tantalizing possibility.

There is yet another man who bore a ceremonial and honorific name that can lay claim to the title of historical King Arthur, and his background gives even further insight into how the real Excalibur, the actual cold steel of the blade, looked and felt, and perhaps a reason why Geoffrey and other early chroniclers labeled Arthur as Roman. A second-century general, Lucius Artorius Castus is the favorite of some to be the real King Arthur, or at least one of several men who were conflated to form King Arthur, to the point that the 2004 film, *King Arthur*, purported to be based on the "true story" of the "real" King Arthur, set as its title character a man descended from a long line of men named Artorius, thereby seeming to combine the theory favoring Aurelianus and a theory favoring Castus. Current scholarship refers to this possibility as the "second Artorius."[154] It goes further to establish this Artorius indeed as the son of a Christian Roman soldier and a pagan British mother. While the movie was largely chronologically inconsistent, the idea of a multi-generational familial/honorific name does fit in with the theory that Arthur or Artorius or Ambrosius had a name that was a title passed down from father to son, and that a real Excalibur was used as a mark of office. Here again, the idea of conflation works nicely. The sword wielded by this Artorius, however, is not the medieval blade that appears in many popular illustrations and prop reproductions (or on my wall). It is shorter and broader, and blunter at the tip. It still retains the trademark gold handle and hilt, and in agreement with the weapon's early history, is given almost reverential treatment by the native Britons who Clive Owen's Artorius

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[154] Ibid

encounters. Perhaps one of the only things the movie got right was in fact its depiction of the sword; at least, it was closer than any previous incarnation to the way a real Excalibur likely looked.

However, a 21st-century movie is not enough to close the book on who the "real" King Arthur may have been. Far from it. The real Castus is commemorated on two monuments in Yugoslavia (the Roman province of Pannonia) and had a distinguished military career serving the Roman Empire, ranging from service in Judea to being named the *Praefectus* of the Legio VI Victrix, stationed at York, in the Roman province of Britannia. At one point in his career in Britannia, Castus was sent on an expedition to Brittany (Wales and Cornwall) to suppress a rebellion, and was a general in command of a mixed force of legionnaires and auxiliaries.[155] This mixed force included Sarmatian cavalry, the members of which were forcibly inducted into the Roman fighting force when emperor Marcus Aurelius recruited 8,000 as auxiliaries in 175 C.E. Most of them (5,500) were sent to Northern Britain to battle the native Picts. The legion they were attached to was none other than the Legio VI Victrix, commanded by Castus, who had served in their homeland.[156]

The Sarmatians are incredibly important to the history of the real and the literary Arthur. They provide for Arthur's sword Excalibur the most lasting images of it – the Sword in the Stone and the twin dragons wrapping its hilt, providing some of the earliest seeds for what would later become the trademarks of Arthuriana.

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[155] Barber, 37

[156] Helmut Nickel. "Sarmatian Connection." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

Horsemanship and swordsmanship were highly-valued virtues in the Sarmatian culture, and a sword was seen as a warrior's greatest treasure.[157] Two and a half centuries after they were brought to Britannia, they still retained a very strong tribal identity, having not lost it despite serving at the hand of the Romans in a foreign land. In fact, many of them settled in Lancashire at Bremetannacm (now Ribchester). This strong sense of tribal identity likely contributed to the continued crystallization of important parts of the Arthur story. For one, the Sarmatians worshiped their god of war in a peculiar, yet now-familiar way: with a naked sword planted in the ground or on a raised platform. Later redactors of Arthuriana would have to negotiate this overtly pagan – and phallic – symbology as the sword became an increasingly important element in the Arthur story. The Auchinleck negotiates this by placing the sword in an anvil, atop a stone, in a churchyard, thereby turning a pagan ritual into a figuration of the Cross.[158] Instead of being a magical pagan weapon in its own right, its appearance is attributed to "Ihesu Crist on heighe."[159] It becomes a sword stuck "long and heighe" upright in a churchyard, not one buried in a stone or the ground, as if driven in by hand (a more slantwise proposition than a sword standing straight up and down).

The Sarmatians also brought to the Legio VI a mascot of sorts: a battle standard in the form of a windsock dragon on a pole, likely derived from Julius Caesar's purple dragon. The dragon is the linchpin that binds all of the disparate elements of the sword's journey and Arthur's historicity into a single, coherent literature.

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[157] "Sarmatian." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 1 May 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9065786>.

[158] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin,* ll. 2783

[159] Ibid., ll. 2814

Because of Castus' familiarity with the Sarmatians, his name is likely to have been remembered by the Sarmatian troops in Britain "and their descendants as a synonym for "the General," as the name Caesar became a title for the Romans, and lived on as Kaiser and Tsar among further generations."[160] The similarity of the name Artorius to Arthur, and their mutual use as honorific names or titles of highly-regarded warriors, both of whom are referred to as a *dux bellorum* screams out that if these two men were not related in some manner, then they were at the very least staggeringly similar, and became conflated into the man we now know as King Arthur. These facts provide precedence for an honorific name linguistically proximal to the Welsh honorific "Arthur," and perhaps a justification for the use of that title by later British warrior chieftains. This link is perhaps a bit too tenuous, however, until one considers the image of the dragons upon the hilt of Excalibur.

Not long after the exploits of Castus and Aurelianus, the region of Wales took as its national emblem an icon which persists to this day – a red dragon. The medieval literary Arthur came to be known as Arthur Pendragon, or "head dragon," (a name that has parallels in the Central Asian languages familiar to and used by the Sarmatians – *pan*, meaning 'lord,' and *tarkhan*, meaning 'leader') and his anachronistic heraldic shield alternately had a painting of three gold crowns on a blue field, then 13 crowns on a blue field, and most popularly, a red or gold dragon on a gold or red field. Julius Caesar's emblem, a purple dragon, "through the generations … was slightly altered to Ambrosius' red one, a standard that has become the flag of Wales."[161] Here we have a perfect continuity between imperial Rome, which likely was the

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[160] Helmut Nickel. "Sarmatian Connection." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[161] Frank D. Reno. The Historic King Arthur: Authenticating the Celtic Hero of Post-Roman Britain. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996. pp. 264.

world in which a real historical Arthur lived, the symbol for Arthur himself, the source of his earlier mentions, and his later redactions as a great imperial conqueror in his own right, presaging the ascent of the British Empire under Tudor monarch Elizabeth I, whose family gained legitimacy based on claims of descent from a Welsh King Arthur.

The Welsh connections continue in extant works, including *Spoils of Annwfn*, written in 950 C.E., and the contemporary *Annales Cambriae*, which refers to the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and a villainous character named Medraut (later to become Arthur's rebellious illegitimate son, Mordred) fell. In 1019, the *Legenda Sancti Geoznovii* offer what the New Arthurian Encyclopedia calls the "first "historical" mention of Arthur." In 1050, the *Mabinogion* gives context and texture to this formative period for Arthur. It offers a mixture of pagan and Christian imagery in association with characters that "appear with Arthur in other branches of the tradition, and the tales depict a world in which the native Welsh Arthur would be very much at home."[162] The characters "swear by God, and there is a bishop and a priest in the third branch, but the tales are clearly pre- or at least non-Christian."[163] The four branches of the work represent "important reflexes of inherited Celtic tradition in the Middle Ages," thereby showing a crucial link in the chain that sees the character of Arthur moving from a Celtic and pagan Welsh folk legend to becoming the Christian English king of legend.

In the contemporary story, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a catalogue of Arthur's court is given. Some of the knights represented displayed superior "leaping, eating, and hearing" ability, and others include a "prodigious runner (and) a remarkable seer."[164] Looking ahead just a bit, comic

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[162] Patrick K. Ford. "Mabinobi." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[163] Ibid

[164] Patrick K. Ford. "Culhwch and Olwen." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

book superheroes who accompany Arthurian-styled heroes display similar qualities. Superman is accompanied in the Justice League of America by a prodigious runner: the Flash. One of Captain America's familiars among the Avengers is an android dubbed the Vision. Wolverine, another Avenger, is possessed of heightened senses, including hearing and smell. These assemblages – the Avengers and the Justice League – bear remarkable resemblance to Arthur's court, even at this early juncture in the Arthurian catalogue, as will be detailed later.

The legacy of Arthur's appearance in *Culhwch ac Olwen* is one that presages Arthur's later literary career. He is depicted as a "great king whose reputation is far-flung, his activities are far from those of the feudal overlord of romance. Rather, he is like the hero in a wonder tale, aided by magic and accompanied by men with supernatural gifts, and his chief opponent has affinities with the divine animals of Celtic mythological tradition."[165] This work is also the first time that Arthur and a weapon recognizable as his Excalibur appear together.

This is the nexus between the Welsh folk Arthur/Artorius/Ambrosius Aurelianus and the Galfridian Arthur. In 1130, Geoffrey of Monmouth pens his famous work, which was quickly distributed around the Continent in various languages within two decades, redactions which added elements such as the Grail Quest, the Round Table, and Sir Lancelot.[166]

The only further established piece of Arthuriana yet to be written by the time the Auchinleck was compiled was Malory's work, and that was derivative of what had come before. It is important to say that the Auchinleck manuscript was not compiled during the formative period of the Arthur mythos. Arthurian lore had already been well-established, just as Superman

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[165] Ibid

[166] The preceding chronology I owe to p. xxxiii-xxxv of the New Arthurian Encyclopedia.

was established when DC decided to reboot its entire universe. It took an already-well-known and established character and returned him to his basics, with a few twists because of the time period – Superman no longer fought slum lords and mobsters, but rather engaged in pro-American, anti-Soviet propaganda and was overtly nationalistic in his new incarnation, and similarly with the Auchinleck Arthur, who now goes on crusades, swears by Jesus, and never meets Sir Lancelot.

The exclusion of Lancelot is the perfect gateway to discuss how the compilers of the Auchinleck altered that Welsh Pagan warrior into a model of British and Christian kingship, contrasting with the Classical and biblical examples of Alexander the Great and King David.

By the time the Auchinleck was compiled, Arthur had picked up several elemental pieces that could not be taken out – Guinevere, the sword, the wizard and the savior persona. The writers did not take these away – they couldn't. But they did make them expressly English, and expressly Christian.

The first victim of this shift in language is the knight who would become Arthur's right-hand man … that is, before he decided to sleep with the queen. The exclusion of Lancelot is done very consciously within the work, as it specifically types the romances of other traditions as foreign and therefore ancillary. In Lines 8906-8906, the work says:

> seþþen hadde Launcelot
> In his ward almest a ȝer
> So þe romaunce seyt elleswher.

The text understands itself and its role in the exclusion of French traditions, and it is explicit in this role by typing the "romaunce" in which Lancelot as happening "elleswher."

Even more explicit are lines 20-30 at the very beginning of the text:

Ac on J[n]glisch ichil tel þerfore
Riȝt is þat J[n]glische vnderstond
Þat was born in Jnglond.
Freynsche vse þis gentil man
Ac euerich Jnglische Jnglische can;
Mani noble ich haue yseiẏe
Þat no Freynsche couþe seye,
Biginne ichil for her loue
Bi Ihesus leue þat sitt aboue
On Inglische tel mi tale -
God ous sende soule hale.

These lines serve as a mechanism to explicitly, and immediately throw out all other traditions and all other languages in which Arthur may appear, for none can tell of Arthur, an English hero, as the English can, even though he originally fought against the incursion of the English's ancestors, the Saxons. But at this point in time, Arthur is typed as a hero of the English, as the works "seem to be increasingly embedded in the cultures from which they come and to possess within themselves more and more of the cultures linked intentions." [167] Even though stories of Arthur did not originate with the Anglo-Saxons, they were there for the events in question. They were just on the other side. It is possible that by mobilizing against the British peoples (i.e. the Celts, Irish, and Welsh) a hero of British pedigree, that the English were using the island's greatest figure to cement their own legitimacy as its proprietors, rather than the Norman French. Therefore, the English have the full and only right to tell Arthur's 'real' story – which can be read specifically as his English story, despite his Welsh origins and the pre-Galfridian tradition of him battling the Saxons – heretofore a canonical aspect of the tale.

So the alternate traditions have been quickly thrown out just by way of re-working language. But how does the Auchinleck make this now-English king into a proper Christian? It

[167] Greenblatt, 25

starts with Excalibur. Recall the dragon motif and the pagan mysticism surrounding the roots of the Sword in the Stone myth, and also recall that Excalibur, in several stories is introduced either by the Lady of the Lake or the wizard Merlin, and you have one of the most difficult pagan symbols to get rid of in the story of Arthur. The sword's inherent importance to the story precludes it being completely dismissed out of hand, but it still has to be dealt with.

With such a rich non-Christian tradition surrounding the sword, it must be changed in some manner to fit the form of the British Christian king that the Auchinleck tries to construct. First, it is taken from the province of Merlin and paganism into the churchyard, where it is introduced not by the dark-skinned wizard Merlin, but by a bishop[168]. Instead of being a magical pagan weapon in its own right, its appearance is attributed to "Ihesu Crist on heighe."[169] Immediately, one forgets the image of the Lady of the Lake holding up the sword for Arthur to grasp, or a sword stuck not "long and heighe" upright in a churchyard, but buried in a stone, as if driven in by hand (a more slantwise proposition than a sword standing straight up and down). In this more vertical formation suggested by the Auchinleck, the sword that was once Caledbolg becomes a figuration of the Christian cross rather than a symbol of the native Britons' Druidic roots. The elevation of the English language occurs yet again on the sword, the legends of which predate Middle English:

> "Ichil wele that ye it wite
> On the pommel was ywrite
> 'Icham yhot Estalibore
> Vnto a king fair tresore.'
> On Jnglis is this writeing
> 'kerue stiel & iren & al thing.'"

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[168] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin,* ll. 2783

[169] Ibid., ll. 2814

On the pommel is written, “I am called Excalibur, unto a king a fair treasure.” And specifically, the work says, “In English is this writing,” also saying that the sword carves steel, iron, and all things. While the abilities of the sword are consistent with its pagan Welsh analogues, this is most certainly not the Welsh Caledvwlch or the Irish Caledblog, or even the Latin Caliburnus. It says specifically, in English, that it is “Estalibore.”

With the sword being typed as a figuration of the Cross, upon which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, the purpose of the King David psalm appears clear. Dauid the Kyng is not a biographical work, as the Alexander and the Arthur are. It is a paraphrase of Psalm 51, written by David after he commits adultery with Bathsheba. In light of the exclusion of the Lancelot storyline, and the loving relationship that Arthur and Guinevere share in the Auchinleck, the proximity of these works demonstrates that they are indeed in dialogue with one another.

The Arthur text, in combination with the two other king texts, shows a distinct effort to either excise or appropriate all non-English and non-Christian traditions on two levels. The higher level of re-appropriation involves the combination of the elements of the two pre-Christian kings of Classical and Biblical roots into a single British Christian monarch. The Auchinleck Arthur then, consists of parts of the Classical heroes and parts of the Biblical kings of Israel. He is, in a sense, the best of both worlds. The lower and more detail-oriented level of re-appropriation includes the reshaping of details within the individual story to fit the Christian English model. There is no better microcosm of this than in the life of Merlin, which resembles the vita of St. Rumwold, the saint who was born, then miraculously preached for three days and

died of exhaustion[170]. The wizard and sorcerer, though born dark-skinned and therefore typed as being out of the space of Christian holiness, is nevertheless given the saintly ability to speak and perform magic basically as soon as he can form a coherent thought because of his importance to the Arthur story.

Therefore, the presence of the texts of Alexander and David in close proximity to the Arthur text shows Arthur as the combination of the great kings before, a king that is now Christian and English, rather than pagan and non-English. Arthur solves the problems of using the previous figures as exemplars of kingship by creating out of the two of them a single textual king that helps to serve the presumed purpose of the Auchinleck manuscript.

The biographical similarities alone between the three kings are impossible to ignore, as is their association with one another in both medieval tradition, and in the Auchinleck. The relationship between Arthur and David, with the former serving as the redeemer of the latter's inequities, is strengthened further by the fact mentioned previously that the adultery storyline is excluded from the Arthur text and that the paraphrase of Psalm 51 under the heading of *Dauid* þ*e King* is derived from a psalm supposedly written by David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Could this be a way of apologizing for Arthur's adultery with his half-sister in other traditions? Or perhaps could it be the other way around – with the adultery storyline removed from Arthur, he no longer shares that particular fault with David. This could in fact be a way of reconciling the absence of the adultery storyline, or perhaps showing yet another reason why David cannot be the ideal of kingship. I prefer the latter. It is another reason why the biblical Jewish king cannot be the ideal in a Christian world.

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[170] Review of "Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives: Vita s. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi, Vita S. Rumwoldi" by Joseph F. Kelly, *Church History*, Vol. 66, # 3 (Sep., 1997), pp.560-561

Even Arthur's possible locus as being Welsh is quashed by the lack of any other language in the manuscript and while some well-known aspects of the story with non-English origins cannot be excluded (i.e. the Sarmatian focus on cavalry and swordsmanship and the pagan mysticism of Merlin), they can be changed and in effect, translated, much in the same way as the words on the sword Excalibur are. The conversion of the sword from the magical Caledbolg/ Caledfwlch of Celtic and Welsh heroes to the Estalibore of an English, Christian king is but one instance where one can see the sure signs of appropriation of ideas from other cultures into a conception of Arthur.

At the time the Auchinleck was compiled, there had already been an established literary Arthurian tradition dating back 200 years to Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia. However, since that work, Arthur had crossed the English Channel and been translated into Norman French, and given an adulterous wife, a betrayal by his most trusted knight, and an illegitimate son. The story had drifted away from its center, Britain. Since the Auchinleck, as the earliest known monolingual middle English text, is theorized to have been produced with the intent of creating a national, British body of literature, what better a centerpiece would there be but a revitalized, re-anointed King Arthur?

The Auchinleck manuscript is the first known anthology of English literature, and is the largest collection of English romances up until that time. Before the Auchinleck, books had been written almost exclusively in Latin or French, but by 1330, English was beginning to become an acceptable language for printed matter.[171] It was during this time that the English began to shift

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[171] Loomis, Laura Hibbard. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340." Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962: 156-157. First published in PMLA 57 (1942): 595-627. pp. 157.

away from French and to form a separate sociopolitical identity, so it follows that the use of "Inglisch", as it is referred to in the manuscript, in the written word would be a source of national unification.[172]

King Arthur is not who he is – textually – because of a single author's treatment of him. If the legacy and future of Arthur rested upon evocative writing and skillful characterization, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia would have killed Arthur long ago. But something about the story itself – the Text, rather than the Work – lit a fire. The story resonated. Like those eight notes that represent everything that the collective imagination conceives of when it thinks of Superman, the mere name Arthur evokes images, ideals, concepts, and traditions. In the 2004 film, before the climactic battle, Stellen Skarsgard's character Cerdic echoes this very sentiment in his parley with Arthur: "Arthur, wherever I go on this wrenched island, I hear your name. Always half whispered, as if you were... a god."

But why did the story resonate? Why did that name come to evoke the images that it now evokes? Because Arthuriana is a text, not a work. Nor is it not monolithic. It resists traditional classifications and hierarchies, as Barthes said. All of these traditions, like the character of Arthur himself, and like the movie's Arthur, are admixtures of previous traditions. In the Auchinleck, Arthur is Alexander and David – classical and biblical – combined and refined. The textual history of the elemental components of Arthuriana is similarly mixed.

There are key elements here, though, despite some being stripped away, that resonate with the stories around Arthur: the stories of David and Alexander. These are the elements of Arthur that we find in almost every single Arthurian narrative, regardless of the project of its

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[172] Calkin, Siobhain Bly. Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript. New York: Routledge, 2005. pp. 8-9.

creators, regardless of religion or historical context. But it is only in the Auchinleck that they are put in such strong relief with the two other kings. These elements are the four roles of Warrior King, Boy King, Giant Slayer, and Outsider that each of these three kings from three different eras and three different religions fulfill.

When David slays Goliath, he is but a boy.[173] While David is considered to be around 30 years of age by the time he takes the throne of Judah (seven and a half years before he conquers the remnants of Saul's dynasty[174]), his ascent to power began when he was but a boy of possibly 12.

Alexander took his first military command at the age of 18, when he led a crucial charge that decided one of Phillip's battles in 338 B.C.E., and by 20 he was crowned king after his father had been assassinated by his own guard.[175]

Arthur of course, is but a squire when he looses the sword Excalibur from the stone.[176] In fact the Auchinleck calls him "Arturet … mild & meke" (ll.2851-2). The –et suffix is used several times in the text in much the same way the suffix is used in modern American English – to denote something small. A medieval squire would have been between the ages of 14 and 21, making Arthur still very much an adolescent or at best, a young man.[177] This youth causes

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[173] Kirsch, 50

[174] Ibid, 135

[175] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>.

[176] According to nearly all sources I consulted, the tales surrounding the origin of Excalibur vary from text to text and from interpretation to interpretation. It is sometimes one in the same with the Sword in the Stone, and sometimes it is only acquired by Arthur from the Lady of the Lake. The John Boorman film *Excalibur* (1981) reconciles the two origin stories rather nicely by having Excalibur pulled from the stone, and then later repaired by the Lady of the Lake. For a more complete discussion on this, see the "Excalibur" entry in Phyllis Ann Karr's The Arthurian Companion, Second Edition.

[177] Marvin Hull. Castle Learning Center: Medieval Knights. 1997. Castles of Britain: Dedicated to the Study and Promotion of British Castles. 20 May 2006 < http://www.castles-of-britain.com/castle35.htm>.

several problems for Arthur, as even during his more epic battles within the text, his closest allies, namely King Ban, question whether his youth hinders his skill and knowledge on the battlefield. Ban says to Arthur as the young king girds himself for a skirmish, "Nay, lete me … For þou art to ȝong and ek to lite oȝain swiche a deuel to smite"[178].

Despite this doubt, Arthur, David, and Alexander gain great fame in battle. Though young, they prove their mettle in the heat of combat, many times against large or giant-sized foes such as Gog, Magog, Gogmagog, Goliath, or pagan kings.

All three kings, on one level or another, share an element of outsidership. Like Alexander, Arthur must deal with internal rebellion, and this similarity is borne out in two remarkably similar passages from the works contained within the Auchinleck.

At the same time of Arthur's coronation, two kings lament his superior place and plan a rebellion:

> "As he was fair doinde þis
> King Lot, king Nanters & oþer of priss
> Of (Arthur's) ȝiftes spite hadden
> & his coroun anon wiþradden.
> Vp þai sterten with gret bost,
> Euerich king wiþ al his ost
> & seyd an herlot for noþing
> No schuld neuer ben her king
> & þouȝt wiþ gret deshonour
> For to misdo sir Arthour,
> Ac Arthour men bitven þrest."[179]

Arthur is not immediately accepted as the king because he is an outsider not only by virtue of his illegitimate birth, but because of the sheer fact that he is but a boy. Arthur's youth

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[178] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6338-6340

[179] Ibid, ll. 3134-43

causes rebellion among some of the other nobles of the land[180] just as the kings of the city states of Greece rebelled against their new youthful king in a similar, yet far more scathing passage found in the full version of the Auchinleck's highly fragmented *Kyng Alisaunder*, a work found nearly whole in MS Laud 622. The similarities between the two passages owe perhaps to a widely held belief in the mutual authorship of the two works,[181] which appear together in the Lincoln's Inn manuscript,[182] and therefore perhaps an understanding of an implicit connection between Arthur and Alexander:

> "And a letter, par amoure,
> Of whiche swiche was the tenure:
> 'Darrye, kyng of alle kynges,
> The godes that haueth to eldringes,
> For his nexte by-syb cosyn
> Beeth Jubiter and Appolyn,
> Gouernoures of lewed and lered
> That beeth in this middellerd,
> Sendeth gretyng withouten amoure
> To a younge fals robboure.
> Alisaunder, thou conion wood,
> Jn the spilleth thi faye blood!
> Thou hast withholde my trowage,
> And ydon me more outrage –
> Brent myne tounes, myne men yslaw.
> Thou art worthi to ben ydrawe.
> Nere-the-lees, thou canst no good;
> Jch wyte it al thi younge blood.
> There-fore Ich habbe thee ysent
> A top and scourge to present,
> And with golde a little punge,
> For thou has yeres yonge.
> Wende thou hom therewith and pleye,

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[180] Dixon-Kennedy, 27

[181] David Burnley. "Dynastic Romance: Of Arthour and of Merlin." Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages II: The Arthur of the English, ed. W.R.J. Baron. Cardiff, England: University of Wales Press, 1999. pp. 84.

[182] London, Lincoln's Inn MS 150. W. Midlands, Shropshire. Late 14th (*Kyng Alisaunder*) and 15th centuries. 6746 lines. The Lincoln's MS also contains a version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin*.

Ich thee rede, yongue boye![183]"

Additionally, one must also remember that Alexander was himself not Greek, though he is typed as Greek because of his supposed divine lineage that he later constructed for himself[184]. Curiously, though Alexander has become associated with the Hellenistic society, in the *Alisaunder* text, he is quite cruel to the kings of Greece, who had been a thorn in his father's side.[185] One reason for this, at least in the context of the Auchinleck, could be that Greece went to war with Troy, whose last survivor, Brutus, is said by Geoffrey in Historia to have traveled to Britain and to have slain the giants that lived there,[186] consequently founding the city named Troia Nova, which then became Trinovantum, which then became Caer Lud, in honor of the man who rebuilt it, then it became Caer Llundain, and finally, London.[187] In Geoffrey's Historia, Brutus is "the traditional founder of the British people (and) the progenitor of a line of kings and the eponym of Britain itself."[188]

David is an outsider not only because of his youth, but because of his status as an outlaw before he becomes King of Judah. When Saul seeks to murder him to prevent his popular

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[183] MS Laud Misc. 622, *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 1688-1730

[184] Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <lhttp://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>.

[185] MS Laud Misc. 622 *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 285-1300

[186] One of the giants that Brutus reputedly slew was named Gogmagog – a fusing together of a pair of giants called Gog and Magog. The explicit presence of these giants also plays a much more direct role in the Alexander text, as I will demonstrate.

[187] Historia, Book I, Ch. XVII

[188] Dixon-Kennedy, 69-70

ascendancy to the throne, David flees into the wilderness and serves for a brief time, ironically enough, with the Philistine army, whose champion he slew as a boy.[189]

But, there are crucial ways in which Arthur deviates from David and Alexander, and it is these elements that suggest an Arthurian lineage for today's comic book superheroes. Not only do they echo the four roles, but by and large they also subscribe to a strict moral code, a code that was first introduced, conceptually, in association with Arthur and his Round Table, introduced in Wace's 1155 translation of Historia into Norman French verse (*Brut*) as serving to establish equality among both high and low born.

Some authors, like Coogan, locate the development of the superhero moral code in more recent characters, characters who have more to do with the look and function of modern superhero outfits than they do the interiority of those superheroes. Coogan in particular places the onus on three heroes in particular: Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and Robin Hood. Through any lens other than a medievalist one, his argument is quite sound, historically speaking. All three predate modern superheroes. All three provided important conventions that have come to define modern superheroes. They are closer in appearance, function, and mission to superheroes than is Arthur, at least, historically speaking.

The "newest" of these three is Zorro, the character created by Johnston McCully in 1919 for a serial pulp magazine. He was depicted as a sort of Californian Robin Hood, "championing peasants oppressed by a corrupt government."[190] His particular contribution to modern superheroes is the use of the mask and cape, as well as the use of a sobriquet that identifies his

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[189] I Samuel 18-23

[190] Evangelista, 637

persona: Zorro, the Fox. However, part of Coogan's definition of the superhero convention of identity shoots him down as a true superhero: "Characters like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro established both the heroic and the secret identities that were to become hallmarks of superheroes. However, the heroic identities of these characters do not firmly externalize either their alter ego's inner character or biography."[191] The moral code assigned by Coogan to Zorro flies in the face of the very fact that he is defined as a Californian Robin Hood, which establishes his moral code as derivative of the moral code assigned to Robin Hood. The same goes for the Scarlet Pimpernel, a heroic figure of late-19th and early-20th century drama and literature. But, despite the dismissal of these two heroic figures, the great avenger of Sherwood Forest still remains.

Coogan asserts that "the superhero code, a primary element of the hero's mission, probably finds its cultural archetype in the stories of Robin Hood, the outlaw who rights wrongs. Robin Hood follows his own code, ignoring the law, but meting out justice to the oppressors and alleviating the needs of the poor."[192] The earliest mention of Robin Hood crops up in 1377, notably before Malory writes Le Morte d'Arthur and ostensibly canonizes the idea of Camelot as the white city on a hill. So far, so good for the argument that superheroic moral codes evolved from Robin.

But there is a problem with this first reference. It only mentions the existence of such a figure, not his mission to rob from the rich and give to the poor. The character first appeared in a form recognizable to modern readers in a series of poems called *Robin Hood and the Monk*,

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[191] Coogan, 32

[192] Ibid, 124

which has been dated to 1450. However, even if a moral code is assigned to Robin Hood at the point of his earliest mention – and it is of dubious credibility to do so – well into the late 15th century, the character was seen as no more than a murder and a thief, and was not at all egalitarian. Only the modern conception of Robin Hood "includes his stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, punishing evildoers, winning archery tournaments, and defending the English throne for his king. Many of these deeds … date from as late as the 18th century."[193]

Arthur, on the other hand, first came into possession of his Round Table in 1155, when Historia was translated into Norman French by the scribe Wace, who first introduced the famous furniture. The Round Table famously has no head, and assigns equal status to all seated at it, hence the reading of the table as symbolizing Arthur's egalitarianism. The table itself predates the very first mention of Robin Hood by more than 200 years, and beyond that, the idea of Camelot as the virtuous white city on a hill, considered a late entry into the Arthurian tradition, also predates any coherent tales of Robin Hood.

Camelot was not mentioned by name until Chretien de Troys' Lancelot (though it was only mentioned once and is not present in all manuscripts), but the tradition of Arthur's base of operations being a bright city in the Roman design goes back to Geoffrey's depiction of the city of Caerleon in Historia. But during the 13th century, Camelot, as we imagine it today, became an Arthurian fixture. From then on, "it served as the point of departure for Grail questers, and in the *Mort Artu* Gawain expressed his desire to be buried at Camelot, which had obviously become by that time the ideological, as well as the geographical center of the Arthurian world."[194]

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[193] Evangelista, 505-506

[194] Norris J. Lacy. "Camelot." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

Like Superman after him and unlike any hero before him, the stories of Arthur reach beyond the bounds of nation, making him a hero for the world because of the fact that he fulfills the four roles and because of the ideals of Camelot and the Round Table; in short, the moral code. In the tradition of his roots in sub-Roman Britain, Arthur takes on the Roman role of *restitutor orbis*, the Restorer of the World – likely the roots for the Celtic oral tradition of a returning hero, which in turn were the roots for Malory's famous epitaph.

Many of Malory's sources, including Geoffrey's Historia say nothing about a supposed return of Arthur. Three texts preceding Malory however, do make mention of some formulation of an epitaph. The first is one of Malory's primary sources, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, written in English. Arthur sails away to the island of Avalon 'A whyle to hele me of my wounde,' and when his remaining knight, Bedwere, visits Canterbury the next day, he sees the Archbishop tending to a fresh tomb, 'coveryd it was with marboll graye/ And with Ryche lettres Rayled Aryght.'[195] Though the actual words are never read aloud, Bedivere can tell from them who is buried there: " 'Ermyte,' he sayd, 'with-oute lesynge, here lyeth my lord that I haue lorne,/ Bold arthur, the beste kynge/ That euyer was in bretayne borne."[196] This speech by Bedivere seems to also have influenced the author of the text that appears in the Auchinleck, as similar words are echoed at the death of Arthur on the battlefield:

> Quaþ king Arthour 'þat haue y leue
> Al what ichaue mi swerd proued.'
> Quaþ Ban 'ȝe no haue it nouȝt deleid
> þat ȝe no haue it wele aseyd.'
> 'Nay sir,' quaþ Arthour 'þat folk was lite
> þat y no miȝt to wille smite

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[195] J. Douglas Bruce. Le Morte Arthur. London: EETS, 1903. ll. 3504-5

[196] Ibid., ll. 3550-3

&, to ek þat, ye slouȝ so fele
þat half no miȝt y me bistere.'
þo sayden our oþer hem bitvene,
Most he libben & ythen,
Bitvene Breteine & Costentinenoble
No worþ anoþer kniȝt so noble.[197]

Yet, in Malory's other source, the French romance *La Mort le Roi Artu*, there is an epitaph that looks to build upon simply this deathbed praise of Arthur and take step towards the final leonine hexameter Latin epitaph[198] that Malory writes: "CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIST EN SA SUBJECTION .XII. RIOAUMES."[199]

While sources point toward the composition of this work and the now-famous epitaph in the late 15th century[200], the concept of the return of Arthur, or of a great near-messianic warrior, is a tradition that goes back as far as the Roman Empire[201].

Malory's sources largely disagree on whether or not Arthur is dead at the end of the story. By allowing for the possibility of Arthur's survival, Malory acknowledges the long standing tradition of a returning hero with it's origins in Celtic lore, which was passed through oral, not written channels[202].

In the form of modern superheroes, Arthur has seemingly fulfilled this promised return. In it, he provides the necessary combination and eliding of previous traditions that is wholly

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[197] *Of Arthour and of Merlin*. Auchinleck MS, ll. 9556-67

[198] John Withrington. "The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's 'Morte Darthur'." Arthurian Literature VII. Comp. Richard Barber. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 1987.

[199] *La Mort le Rio Artu: Roman du XIII Siècle*, ed. Jean Frappier. Parris: Paris 1936.

[200] P.J.C. Field's "*The Earliest Texts of Malory's Morte Darthur"* introduction in Malory: Text and Sources cites the Caxton printed edition of the text as the first most important form as well as the British Library Additional Manuscript 59678, both being dated to 1485.

[201] Geoffrey Ashe. The Discovery of King Arthur. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985.

[202] John Withrington. "The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's 'Morte Darthur'." Arthurian Literature VII. Comp. Richard Barber. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 1987.

unique and then passes that on to this current generation, the primary difference being his addition of a moral code and prosocial mission

Arthur combines the ancient heroes and the royal heroes into a singular being, who, in his different characterizations over the centuries, has had an impact on Western culture unlike any other singular figure. The abilities he displays – at times superhuman strength and durability, tactical genius, a staunch moral code, and a connection to the mystical/magical – are the same abilities we see in modern superheroes. The same elements he absorbs from the previous heroes – the Outsider, the Boy King, the Warrior King, and the Giant Slayer – are also borne out by modern day heroes – some more than others. The most prominent among these are also among the oldest of the modern comic book superheroes – Superman and Captain America.

Interlude
The Gray Champion: Who Was that (Un)masked Man?

The first few pages of Superman: Man of Steel #17 show a gloved fist pounding away at a steel barrier. As the panels progress, the glove tears away as the metal weakens, revealing, finally, a massive fist and forearm covered with bony spurs and plates. This was the world's first introduction to the creature known as Doomsday, the creature that would eventually kill Superman in the pages of Superman #75.

Consider this interlude a version of that introduction – just as anticipatory, but not nearly as foreboding. Rather, it is a gesture at what is to come.

In 1835, Nathaniel Hawthorne – he of The Scarlet Letter – penned a short story, entitled "The Gray Champion." The story tells of an incident that occurred during the American colonial period, when the colonists of New England rose up against King James II's chosen governor, Sir

Edmund Andros. Hawthorne writes that Andros, "holding office from the King, and wholly independent of the country" made laws and levied taxes "without concurrence of the people immediate or by their representatives; the rights of private citizens (were) violated, and the titles of all landed property declared void; the voice of complaint (was) stifled by restrictions on the press; and finally, disaffection overawed by the first band of mercenary troops that ever marched on our free soil."

The people of Boston, on April 18, 1689, rose up and overthrew Andros, who, "in a show of strength designed to quell rumors that William of Orange had moved on James II and that there would soon be a new king,"[203] had hired mercenary troops to quell uprisings in the city. But Hawthorne adds a twist to the story of the colonists' revolt.

Former governor Simon Bradstreet steps forward to calm a gathering mob, and to urge them to obey the authority of the king – which is, as proven by the fact that the king could potentially change at any moment, but a constructed authority. As a double rank of mercenaries advances, the crowd fears a massacre. Then, a voice from the crowd rings out: "O Lord of Hosts, provide a Champion for they people!"

It is a cry not unlike "Superman, save me!" or, if your tastes are more musical, lines from Remy Zero's "Smallville" television theme song: "Somebody save me" or lyrics from Styx's song, "Captain America": "We run for our lives / And we're searching for shelter now / From the coming storm / Are you the man who can lead us once again / So come on, suit up, let's go." There's also "Land of Confusion," by Genesis: "Ooh Superman where are you now / When

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[203] Coogan 148

everything's gone wrong somehow." The names may have changed, but it appears that in more than a century and a half, the sentiment has not: Somebody, save us.

But the man who steps forward – or rather appears out of thin air – is not a costumed and super-powered muscle man. Though Coogan types this hero as an "avenger-vigilante" in line with Robin Hood, under his heading of dual-identity crime-fighter, the description of this so-called Gray Champion, and the words that he speaks, go far beyond the scope of just proving his concept of the identity convention required for most characters of the superhero genre. They reach both forward and backward. The title gestures at the naming conventions of 20th and 21st century superheroes, but the words that the Champion speaks, and the attire he wears, reach back not to the Britain of the 17th century, but to a still wild and untamed Britannia of the 6th century.

Hawthorne writes that in response to that plea, an ancient man emerges from the crowd, wearing "the old Puritan dress, a dark cloak and a steeplecrowned hat, in the fashion of at least fifty years before, with a heavy sword upon his thigh, but a staff in his hand to assist the tremulous gate of age."

The sword of the day in 1689 was a rapier, a primarily civilian sword with a blade measuring 2.5 cm in width on average. If one carried a sword that was not a rapier, chances are it would have been a likewise light smallsword (a light, one-handed sword designed for thrusting). Neither of these two could be rightly described as "heavy" implements, seeing as by the end of the 17th century, the rapier was significantly lightened and shortened, and the smallsword itself was a descendant of this foreshortening and lightning of the rapier.[204] However, there are two possible swords that would fit the bill: a medieval broadsword and a

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[204] Evangelista, 493

Roman *spatha*, weapons that would have been used by the largely fictional medieval version of King Arthur, and most of his likely sub-Roman historical counterparts.

The typical broadsword is much longer and heavier (over 1 meter long, weighing on average one kilogram with a blade 3.5 cm wide on average) than either the rapier or the smallsword, each of which were worn off the hip, perpendicular to the leg. The *spatha* was a "long, straight, single-edged iron or steel cut-and-thrust sword" used by Roman cavalry, and was typically 27 inches (0.68 meters) in length, longer than its cousin the *gladius*, which was 19-26 inches long (0.48-0.66 meters).[205] Because of its increased length, the *spatha* was worn off of the left thigh, just as the Grey Champion's sword is worn. It was used, in one formation or another, by Roman armies of the first through seventh centuries of the Common Era and was also popular in medieval Europe well into the 11th and 12th centuries.

But the presence of a "heavy sword" is not enough, of course, to immediately say that this man, dressed in Puritan garb, can be read as a figuration of Arthur. In fact, the Puritan garb would seem to speak against this figure being either an Arthur of mixed religious parentage (pagan and Christian) or the crusading (Catholic) Arthur of later narratives (like the Auchinleck). But then this Gray Champion begins to speak. He walks in between the two groups, and stops, about 20 yards from the colonists, holding his staff high, and cries, "Stand!" As Andros prepares to order the soldiers forward, he issues a warning to the mysterious figure: "Are you mad old man? How dare you stay the march of King James's Governor?" The old man replies:

> I have stayed the march of a King himself, ere now. I am here, Sir Governor, because the **cry of an oppressed people hath disturbed me in my *secret place***; and the ***beseeching this favor earnestly of the Lord*, it was vouchsafed me to *appear once again on earth***, in the good old cause of his saints.

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[205] Ibid, 508

This Gray Champion, with a "heavy sword" on his thigh, was awoken by "the cry of an oppressed people" from his "secret place" and was urged to "appear once again on earth." Compare this with a passage from Book 21, Chapter 7 of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur:

> YET some men say in many parts of England that **King Arthur is not dead**, but **had by the *will of our Lord Jesu* into *another place***; and men say that ***he shall come again***, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus.

The "secret place" and "another place" echo one another, as do the "beseeching this favor earnestly of the Lord" and the "will of our Lord Jesu," as well as the appearance "once again on earth" and the prophecy that Arthur "shall come again." Also, compare the Gray Champion text to this passage from Chapter 5 of the same book, detailing Arthur's departure to his own "secret place":

> Alas, said the king, help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried over long. Then Sir Bedivere took the king upon his back, and so went with him to that water side. And when they were at the water side, even fast by the bank hoved a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur. Now put me into the barge, said the king. And so he did softly; and there received him three queens with great mourning; and so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head.
> **And then that queen said: Ah, dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me?** alas, this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold. And so then they rowed from the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all those ladies go from him. Then Sir Bedivere cried: **Ah my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies? Comfort thyself, said the king, and do as well as thou mayst, for in me is no trust for to trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound**: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul.

The bolded and italicized portions are of my own doing, so as to highlight the similarities in this, the account of the final moments of Arthur's life, and the appearance of the Gray Champion. As for the sword, the second passage immediately follows Arthur imploring one of his knights to heave his sword Excalibur into the sea.

And as if to further cement the similarities, Hawthorne goes on to say that after his inspirational appearance and mysterious disappearance (he "faded from their eyes, melting slowly into the hues of twilight, till, where he stood, there was an empty space"), this Champion appeared eighty years later on the occasion of the Boston Massacre in King Street. Five years after that, "in the twilight of an April morning, he stood on the green, beside the meeting-house, at Lexington," where the first shots of the Revolution were fired, and again "when our fathers were toiling at the breastwork on Bunker's hill, all through that night the old warrior walked his rounds." Hawthorne concludes his tale with a promise, a mission, if you will, for the Gray Champion: "should domestic tyranny oppress us, or the invader's step pollute our soil, still may the Gray Champion come, for he is the type of New England's hereditary spirit; and his shadowy march, on the eve of danger, must ever be the pledge, that New England's sons will vindicate their ancestry."

The key here is not that the colonies here addressed are that of New England (as opposed to the England across the Atlantic, and therefore implying a new beginning), or even that there is perhaps a gesture to a sense of the new evolving out of and then replacing the old (therefore England's heroes of old become the heroes of New England). It is the idea that this Champion exists to fight domestic tyranny and invasion. These are the very missions to which Arthur is dedicated, both historically and literarily.

The historical figure on which Hawthorne is thought to have based his Champion, the Angel of Hadley, was in reality General William Goffe, who "in 1675 is reported to have suddenly appeared, rallied the inhabitants of Hadley, Massachusetts, and led them against an Indian attack … did engage in violent repulse of an enemy, and as one of the signers of the death warrant against King Charles I in the English Civil War, he certainly has a violent history behind him, albeit an untextual one."[206] Even here, this Champion draws comparison with Arthur, who, as I have discussed at length, is most likely to have come from some sort of violent warrior chieftain of sub-Roman Wales. Likely lost in the knight-in-shining-armor rhetoric that now surrounds Arthur, and has for centuries, is the bloodshed and violence that likely accompanied his historic reign.

These echoes, in a sense, of the Arthurian, are the first whispers of the age of superheroes. What this little-known Hawthorne work has provided is yet another historical bridge. When dealing with superheroes as descendants of the ancient heroes, one encounters a gulf of some 3,000 years. With Arthur intervening, the gulf shrinks to 1,500 years. With the inclusion of Hawthorne's Gray Champion, the historical gap has shrunken again to nearly 200 years. Little did Hawthorne suspect that merely 103 years after he penned his short story, that another Champion would arise. Except this one would not be clothed in the austere garb of an old Puritan, but a shocking attire of blue and yellow, with a flowing red cape. Da, na na na na, NA, NA, NA …

Chapter 3
Two Princes

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[206] Coogan, 150

"Folks said his family were all dead
Their planet crumbled but Superman, he forced himself
To carry on, forget Krypton, and keep going"
--Crash Test Dummies, *Superman's Song*

"It was as if the gods of legend had returned to earth"
– *Marvels* by Kurt Buskiek, art by Alex Ross
10th Anniversary Edition

The two most likely candidates for the title of "Modern Arthur" are two of the oldest modern superheroes. They are the two most venerable flagship titles in all of comicdom: DC's Superman and Marvel's Captain America. But before analyzing those two, I will first engage in an exercise.

In the 500 years or so since Malory, we have seen the rise of intermediate heroes that, like Arthur, fit some of the criteria for "superhero" but not quite all. Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel introduced the Identity convention, at least in an embryonic form. They each used masks to hide their real identities, allowing them to operate as heroes without repercussions in their everyday lives. Pulp heroes and mystery men like the Shadow added the distinctive look, the trademark appearance and style that would come to mark some of the more garish superhero attires. His flaming red eyes, his red scarf, and hawk nose made him distinctive from the other cloaked mystery men of the time. Then came Superman, Namor the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, Wonder Woman, and Captain America – the true superheroes.

Having already established that Arthur holds the patent on the pro-social mission convention, how would the great King fit into the established conventions of modern superheroes? Recall Coogan's MPIC conventions for a character to be a superhero. How well

does Arthur fit these conventions? Certainly better than Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and Robin Hood.

First, the prosocial mission. Arthur has two or three depending on which version of the story one follows. Of course there is Arthur's association with finding the Cup of Christ, the Holy Grail, which he becomes associated with in the middle of the 13th century. Arthur is even linked historically and genealogically to the bearer of the Grail himself, Joseph of Arimathea, who bore the story of Jesus to Western Europe, according to legend.[207]

Early on in the Arthurian tradition, Arthur is associated with leading a mixed force of Britons against the invading Saxons. He is typed as defending not only his nation, but the collective of nations native to Britain against an outside force. He is protecting his society against the influences of another, a theme echoed in the rhetoric of the Auchinleck. His 'mission' in that sense is one of unification. Arthur's mission of unification of Britain can be seen in several events within the Arthurian Text. The Battle of Mount Badon, in which Arthur leads Picts, Welsh, and British forces (and if you believe the Castus argument, Sarmatian cavalry as well), serves this mission well. Additionally, later on in the Arthurian tradition, Arthur's shield comes to symbolize the unity of several kingdoms under his rule:

> "From the fourteenth century on … the shield charges attributed to King Arthur are three crowns, probably meant to indicate his superiority over ordinary kings. In the fifteenth century, after the idea had taken hold that these three crowns stood for his three realms of North Wales, South Wales, and Logres, their number was increased up to thirteen, to represent all the kingdoms allegedly conquered by him. The color of Arthur's shield is usually red, though in French sources it is blue, corresponding to the French royal arms."[208]

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[207] R.W. Dunning. Arthur: The King in the West. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. pp. 70-72

[208] Helmut Nickel. "Heraldry." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

The Costume and Chevron conventions, it would seem, would be difficult to fulfill for Arthur. There was, after all, no spandex in either the post-Roman or the medieval era. However, as explained earlier with the motif of the dragon, Arthur does indeed fulfill an embryonic form of the Chevron. Like Captain America, who wears the flag of the United States on his shield, Arthur bears the image of the Welsh dragon upon his. Though he is later typed as an English hero – not a British one – the legacy of the Pendragon continues on as a subtext which recalls his Welsh origins. But even with this chevron, how can Arthur be said to have a costume, given the unprecedented spandex shortage? For this, one has only to turn to Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Arthur's armor, in particular, his helmet, which features a crest of the dragon:

> Arthur himself, having put on a coat of mail suitable to the grandeur of so powerful a king, placed a golden helmet upon his head, on which was engraven the figure of a dragon ... Then girding on his Caliburn, which was an excellent sword made in the isle of Avallon, he graced his right hand with his lance, named Ron, which was hard, broad, and fit for slaughter.[209]

As for Powers, Arthur he is depicted to have remarkable strength and durability, early on being associated with killing hundreds of foes singlehandedly in the Auchinleck. He is also aided by his supernatural sword and by the magic of his wizard, Merlin, in much the same way that Captain Marvel has his powers bestowed upon him by the wizard Shazam. Arthur doesn't exactly have a secret identity, though like Batson, he is an anonymous squire before pulling the sword from the stone in pre-Auchinleck redactions.

With this reading of Arthur as a potentially superheroic character, and his legacy of the moral code, the intervening heroes that Coogan mentions provide merely aesthetic refinements to conventions that arguably already existed. They contributed to the definition, but did not fit it

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[209] Historia, Book IX, Ch. 4.

quite as well as Arthur – who preceded its advent – because Arthur not only had a mission, but a pro-social moral code to back it up.

With the pro-social mission firmly established by Arthur, and the other pieces of superhero definition falling into place, by the late 1930's and early 1940's, the time was ripe for that white horse to ride back onto the field of battle on the field of World War II Europe, except the armor was replaced by spandex, and the magical sword Excalibur was replaced by a discus-shaped shield. Nevertheless, the spirit of Arthur and the moral code that it championed remained as strong as ever, and again, demonstrated the same four roles that linked Arthur with the kings and heroes of old.

Superman is a refugee from a shattered world, a world which was destroyed because it refused to recognize the danger that it was in.[210] If this story seems oddly familiar, it is because Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, were the sons of Jewish immigrants from Europe, and they were writing at a time when Hitler's Nazi armies were beginning to spread across Europe, the Old World. Krypton is Superman's Old World, and he, like Moses in the reed basket, is sent through the river of time and space, across the great divide, to a new life, a new country, a New World.

The second of the modern 'princes' to Arthur's king is the Star Spangled Avenger, Captain America, introduced in the pages of Captain America Comics #1 (March, 1941), by Timely Comics. Cap, as he is affectionately known by fans, made his debut as Timely's (now Marvel) third superhero, following the 1939 introduction of the android Human Torch and the

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[210] Scott Beatty. "Alien Races and Worlds." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

anti-hero Namor, the Sub-Mariner.[211] The first glimpse the world got of its new red, white, and blue hero was him delivering a right cross to Adolf Hitler's jaw on the cover of his first issue, drawn by the legendary Joe Simon and Jack Kirby.

The man behind the flag-adorned costume was Steve Rogers, an aspiring art student who, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, decided to enlist in the United States Army. While his heart and his sense of patriotism were unquestionably strong, his physical gifts were lacking, to say the least. Rogers was drawn by Jack Kirby as thin, sickly, and scrawny in the opening panels of the book. Rogers was declared 4-F, unfit for combat. But unbeknownst to Rogers, in the shadows a man named Dr. Erskine whispered to a general that this young man would be perfect for a new experiment called Project: Rebirth.

After Rogers is denied induction into the military, he is secreted off to a top-secret installation, where a Dr. Reinstein injects him with the Super Soldier Serum. Rogers was intended to be the first of an army of perfect human specimens that would battle the forces of the Nazis and the Japanese. But this was not to be. As soon as Rogers' transformation was complete, a German agent screams, "Heil Hitler!" and murders Reinstein, who takes the secret of the real Super Soldier Serum to his grave.

Rogers, now the only Super Soldier, is given the mantle of Captain America, and is placed within the ranks of the army as a bumbling, uncoordinated goof who was the butt of his unit's jokes (dye his hair black and give him glasses and he may as well have been Clark Kent). Rogers was taunted by his fellow soldiers, and when he disappeared from boot camp to take on secret missions as Captain America, he was somehow always mysteriously excused for his

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[211] Carl Burgos (w,a), Paul Gustavson (w,a), and Bill Everett (w, a). Marvel Comics #1 (Oct. 1939), Timely Comics (Marvel Comics).

absence. His commanding officer thought of him as "a lazy incompetent and could never understand why the highers-up kept excusing Rogers's repeated disappearances."[212] In a very real sense, Rogers was pretending to be the "squire," the uninitiated warrior, but is really in fact the "king," as it were – very much like a young Arthur, who appears first in narrative tradition as a lowly squire, but is in reality the next High King of Britain.

From the Mouths of Babes

When Stan Lee pitched his first teenaged superhero to his editor, Tim Goodman, the response was less than stellar: "You say that he's a teenager? A hero can only be an adult! Teenagers are sidekicks!" What Goodman didn't realize at the time was that almost all superheroes were, like Arthur, Boy Kings who came across their Mission when they were children. Superman, for one, came to Earth as an infant. Not only is he a child, but he is the consummate immigrant. Before John Byrne's retcon with Man of Steel, the young Kal El grew up in an orphanage before he was adopted by the Kents. His superpowers as a young child were, to say the least, problematic, and the head of the orphanage was overjoyed when the Kryptonian troublemaker was taken off his hands.[213]

The television series "Smallville" deals with this same sort of narrative, though it takes as its setting Superman's teen years – when like other adolescents around him, he has to negotiate the changes coming with puberty. For young Clark Kent, hair growing in funny places is the least of his problems.[214]

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[212] Peter Sanderson and Les Daniels. Marvel Universe. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1996. pp. 101

[213] Action Comics #1

[214] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:25:48.

As for Steve Rogers, he was a sickly teenager when he tried to enlist for the military, before Dr. Abraham Erskine, under the code name of Prof. Reinstein, injected him with the Super Soldier Serum. Additionally, because of the Serum's side effects, Rogers had remained eternally young, stuck in his late twenties or early thirties until he was assassinated, at which point the Serum broke down, causing his body to rapidly age.[215]

Warrior Kings

> I'm holding out for a hero till the end of the night
> he's gotta be strong and he's gotta be fast
> and he's gotta be fresh from the fight"
> --Emery, *Holding Out for a Hero*

As a warrior, Superman uses his physical abilities – great strength, ice breath, heat beams from his eyes, super speed, and flight – to defeat threats both exterior and interior in relation to his adopted home country. In his earliest issues, he battles social ills and corruption, a battle which evokes the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. In a more abstract sense, Superman constantly wishes to belong to the human community, even though he never can. In a sense, his never-ending battle as the champion of Earth is a Grail quest in itself, except he seeks not the Cup of Christ, but a sense of belonging.[216]

In an era where nuclear war and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust loomed large, Superman fights mad scientists. When corporate moguls began to take over as the dominant cultural villains, Superman's arch-nemesis Lex Luthor takes that form, no longer that of a mad

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[215] Ed Brubaker (w) and Steve Epting (p). "Death of the Dream." Captain America Vol. 4 #26 (May 2007), Marvel Comics.

[216] B.J. Oropeza.. "Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise." The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture. Ed. B.J. Oropeza. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005. pp. 5-6.

scientist.[217] As Arthur evolves literarily, he fights enemies ranging from Saxons to Muslim Saracens and other foreigners – their enemies evolve with the times to fit social constructs, just like Captain America – though not Steve Rogers – ends up fighting Communists in the 1950s

Originally Arthur fought the invading Saxons, but as those Saxons came to be the English and take over the island, Arthur still hung around, shifting the focus of his sword from Saxons to Saracens. Arthur fights for his adopted nation, just as Superman fights for his adopted home world.

Captain America is a soldier, and in many early stories, he carries and uses guns and flamethrowers, though after he was revived, he showed a particular distaste for lethal force, preferring to use his fists and his shield – a defensive weapon – to disable or neutralize a threat.[218] He uses primarily his indestructible shield, a weapon evocative of Arthur's Excalibur in more ways than one, as it serves as both a symbol for the hero and as his battle standard (recall the earlier discussion of its metonymic and metaphoric nature). It also serves as his coat of arms, after a fashion, a function suggested when it is combined with Superman's S shield logo into the shape of a triangular shield when Captain America and Superman are hybridized in Super Soldier #1 (Apr. 1996.).[219]

Interestingly enough, the depiction of Arthur's shield is usually blue and gold or red and gold – two of the three colors of Superman's costume – and it is in the triangular formation of Captain America's original shield (seen only in Captain America Comics #1).

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[217] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:12:06.

[218] Ethan Sacks. "Captain America Lives Again." Daily news 28 Jan 2008 3 May 2008 <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/arts/2008/01/28/2008-01-28_captain_america_lives_again.html>.

[219] Mark Waid (w) and Dave Gibbons (a). Super Soldier #1 (Apr. 1996), Amalgam Comics.

Another interesting point is the association between a flag or national emblem and the use of a shield. Captain America's disc-shaped shield (which was more likely the form of any shield a historical Arthur would have used)[220], is an adaptation of the American flag. Arthur's shield or battle standard was a red dragon – the same "serpent" that was coiled with a mirror image of itself around the hilt of Excalibur. As mentioned before, that red dragon became the national red dragon of Wales, the home of the earliest Arthur traditions.

Giant Slayers

> "Superman never made any money
> Saving the world from Solomon Grundy"
> --Crash Test Dummies, *Superman's Song*

Superman is a more literal interpretation of a giant-slayer, more in the direct mold of David, Alexander, and Arthur, though he does slay giants both figuratively and literally. The figurative giants he fights are corruption and graft, as shown in the pages of Action Comics #1. Sometimes, those giants can be literal, as when Superman battles elemental giants bent on excising the alien from the planet Earth.[221]

In Marvel's Civil War, Captain America opposes the implementation of the Super Human Registration Act, which would require superheroes to be monitored and trained by the government, which he in fact had. Despite the fact that it would codify and require his own experience into standard practice, he realizes that a centralized database of secret identities would be catastrophic for heroes who depend on their anonymity. He also realizes that such an

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[220] Helmut Nickel. "Arms and Armor." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[221] Brian Azzarello (w), Jim Lee (p), Scott Williams (i). "Superman For Tomorrow." Superman #209 (Sept. 2004), DC Comics.

act would nationalize people with super human abilities, tempting the government to call the shots instead of localized superheroes on the ground.

As a bona-fied giant-slayer, Cap fights the Incredible Hulk in his first mission as field general of the Avengers, in Avengers #4. Figuratively, he fights the Nazis and their Fascist ideologies. His greatest foe, the Red Skull, is the embodiment of everything that Hitler stood for. He is the opposite to Rogers in every possible way. Every battle Rogers fights against the Skull is a battle against evil itself.

It is in this particular role, that of the giant slayer, that we see the beginnings of a split between the ways in which different heroes fulfill the four roles. That split is one which is characterized by a divvying-up of the Arthurian conceits. In a post-modern world getting smaller and faster by the day, one single hero cannot contain all of the Arthurian weight. So, the two naturally diverge from one another – still maintaining the moral code and the mission, but differing in their methods and their processes

Journey of the Outsiders

Captain America's early history was in fact largely not one of Outsidership. He was a tool of the government, the United States' greatest weapon against those fascists Nazis. He was the gloved fist of the American military's might, and his shield was that of the eagle on the Great Seal of the United States. But when the war ended, there was no one left to fight. No great evil stood in the way, save for the godless Communists. For a while, Stan Lee had Cap subsisting on battles against Communist opponents, but sales sagged, and the book was canceled. But then, in 1964, after the introduction of heroes with problems, like the Fantastic Four – whose identities were public – and Spider-Man – whose powers made his life as Peter Parker a living hell – Lee

and his old friend Jack Kirby decided to bring the old soldier back, and in the pages of *Avengers* #4, the Star-Spangled Avenger leads Thor, Giant Man, the Wasp, and Iron Man into battle.

But it had been 20 years since Cap had last thrown a punch. Lee largely ignored the 1950's version of the character, and claimed that this one was the real McCoy, frozen in ice since the end of the war and replaced by a stand-in, whose impure Super Soldier injection caused him to go insane. Captain America was no longer a tool of the government, blindly fighting the Nazis or the Communists without asking questions. This Captain was different. During the same incident which caused Rogers to be thrown into the freezing North Atlantic, his sidekick, Bucky, ostensibly perished, causing the now-anachronistic Captain to show psychological complexity that had never been displayed in the character before. Add to that the fact that he had missed out on 20 years of history, and Lee and Kirby had a gem on their hands.

"He felt he didn't belong to our age," Lee said. "He was, as they say, an anachronism. He belonged back in the '40's. Jack hadn't done him that way, and I felt a little bit diffident mentioning it to him, but oh, man, Jack loved the idea." Cap's alienation mirrored that of a nation in the midst of its own identity crisis. Somehow, the former tool of the authorities began to more closely resemble the emerging youth culture, one which grew up with the certainties of the 1950's, but was now feeling excluded and rebellious.[222]

Cap begins to act outside the government, fighting for the ideal of America, not what the government says is the American ideal. After the Watergate scandal, Rogers chooses to shed the mantle of Captain America – albeit briefly – in favor of the caped Nomad, the man without a

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[222] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. DVD. Dir. Steve Kroopnick. Perf. Peta Wilson, Denny O'Neil, Jim Steranko, Michael Chabon, Will Eisner, Mike Richardson, Kevin Smith, Frank Miller, Bradford Wright, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Joe Quesada, Avi Arad, and Neil Gaiman. The History Channel, 2003. 43:55.

country. In a storyline which included the government claiming it owned the suit and the shield, and can therefore do whatever it wants with them, Rogers voluntarily resigns and becomes The Captain. Eventually, the government sees the errors of their ways when their new Cap goes insane. This is a near-perfect reflection of the idea of social authorship in relation to comic books. It is not the singular Auteur (or government) who owns the hero, but the people.

"I thought I was a guy writing and editing fiction," former Batman writer Denny O'Neil said about the reactions he got after DC killed off the second Robin, Jason Todd. "I never realized that, no, the Batman editor and the Superman editor, we are more than that. We are the custodians of folklore."[223]

Superman's outsidership is due to his alien origin and his immigrant status, both of which place him firmly in the category of the Other. He is the Last Son of Krypton, the last survivor of a doomed race, and so has no group to belong to. His home away from Metropolis is the Fortress of Solitude, alternately located in the Arctic or the jungles of the Amazon. His home is loneliness incarnate, located in the places on Earth where man has yet to tread. Inside the Fortress, he keeps relics of worlds and of times that man does not know – he lives amongst relics with no memory, in the space of man's forgetfulness. Perhaps it is because he secretly wishes to be forgotten because of the burden he must bear, the burden of his "never-ending battle."

As if his self-pitying isn't enough, Superman's enemies use his heritage against him. The symbolism of the famous scene depicting Superman floating outside of Lex Luthor's office window is not lost on many – inside the window is the insider's world, the world of the connected and the rich. Outside is the world of everyone else, the little people, those who do not

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[223] Ibid, 1:11:09

matter. Yet, there Superman is, floating there, arms folded, declaring with his presence that he will not simply be ignored. His silence speaks volumes. But nevertheless, Luthor takes great pleasure on keeping his foe on the outside – and reminding him at every moment.[224] Arthur too had to battle against his heritage – that of being an illegitimate son. But, that very same heritage gave him strength, because illegitimate though it was, it was still royal, just as Superman's Kryptonian physiology gives him his powers on Earth.

Beyond the Battlefield

There are several ideologies that Captain America and Superman share with King Arthur. The first of those is a sense of nationalism. Several elements have worked to craft Superman's nationalism, just as they did to craft Arthur's. The first such element for Superman was the concept of immigration. As the creation of two sons of immigrants, Superman is constantly engaged in negotiating a space within the nationality of the United States. He engages in a quintessentially American career – as a journalist, he is under the umbrella of the freedom of the press and freedom of speech. He also engages in normalizing behaviors that will accelerate his assimilation into American society, such as working on his father's farm.

The classic phrase associated with Superman: "Truth, Justice, and the American Way!" is not as old as many would think it is. In fact, the last of the three tent-poles was added during the 1950s television show, "The Adventures of Superman," in an atmosphere in which nationalism was heightened by the chill of the Cold War and the Red Scare. This would seem to make him not an outsider at all. But on the contrary, he is constantly reminded of his outsidership by the obstacles he faces. His greatest enemy, Lex Luthor, constantly reminds him of his alien origin,

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[224] Jeph Loeb (w), Tim Sale (pencil), Bjarne Hansen (ink). Superman for All Seasons. Ed. Dale Crane. New York: DC Comics, 1999. pp. 120-121.

and of the fact that he does not belong.[225] While during World War II and the Cold War, Superman was blatantly nationalistic, as of late, that aspect of his character has fallen away, and he has become more of a worldwide hero. He still lives in the United States, but he is no longer the nationalistic eagle he once was.

Now, on to Captain America, a hero who should be soaking, dripping with patriotism. He is, after all, dressed in the flag. But while during the war years, he could always be counted on for propaganda, in recent decades he has spent more time opposed to the United States government than working for them. To him, the American Way is not what the government says – it is something more ephemeral, something more spiritual, even. It is something that cannot even be written down – only felt.

Like the Auchinleck's Arthur, both superheroes deal explicitly with religion. A Superman fan with some pop culture credentials, Kiss rockstar Gene Simmons (formerly Chaim Witz, born in Israel), understood the parallels of the story to his own religious instruction.

"They took an Old Testament story, which is Moses, whose mother and father were about to be killed by the Egyptians, in this case it was Krypton, and just like Moses went down the Nile, (Superman) landed on Earth as an immigrant and was adopted."[226]

Having been written by two Jewish kids from Cleveland, the parallels stand fairly strong. But since his beginnings, Superman has become more than just a parallel to the story of the Exodus. There is a very insistent Christ element in the story backed by Superman's near-omnipotent powers and by the portrayal of the story in the Christopher Reeve films. The way

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[225] Kevin Spacey's Lex Luthor in "Superman Returns" (2006): "But you know, maybe you're right, you know, maybe it is a little cold. What's the word I'm searching for? It's a little alien. It lacks that human touch."

[226] Ibid 46:59

that Krypton was filmed in those movies featured a white, glowing, ethereal quality, suggestive of Heaven. Marlon Brando's Jor El appears repeatedly as a disembodied voice or glowing countenance, evoking an image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

As a side note, a similar transition happened to the figure of King Arthur. It is very likely that Arthur, if he was a real historical figure or figures, was pagan. Some of the early names for Excalibur have been interpreted to contain some root representing the word 'lightning,' which many peoples of Arthur's time would have seen as a supernatural force. Lightning bolts were wielded by the gods, including Beli of the native pagan Britons. Excalibur, which cast brilliant rays of light to defeat enemies, is, in some linguistic interpretations, descended from a sword whose name meant "the sword of Beli."[227] Yet, by the time the Auchinleck comes around, the sword has become a figuration of the Cross in a churchyard and Arthur is going on crusades.

The Superman movies in particular carry out the creation of the Christ image in regards to the title hero. "Smallville" co-creator Alfred Gough remarked, "You see him three times: at birth, once when he's in his teenage years, and then he suddenly appears at 30 to take on his mantle and save the world." [228]

Imagery and lines from the newest film, "Superman Returns" (2006), serve to strongly reinforce the imagery of Superman as a Christ figure. After using all of his strength to detach the cancerous lump of New Krypton from the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, he flies it up beyond the Earth's atmosphere, releasing it into space. His energy spent, Superman's eyes close, and he falls back to Earth, his legs held together and his arms outstretched in an image evocative

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[227] John Darrah. Paganism in Arthurian Romance. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1994. pp. 102.

[228] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:27:14.

of Jesus on the Cross. The ethereal depiction of Superman's Fortress of Solitude, the bright white garb worn on Krypton, the godlike language that Jor El uses – taken together they all register as messianic imagery.[229]

Echoing messianic tropes, Captain America, whose comic had been killed off in the 1950s, was essentially resurrected in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as the leader of the Avengers. Like Arthur, who sailed off to Avalon to heal himself of his wounds, Rogers was thrown into an icy Atlantic Ocean and frozen in suspended animation. When Prince Namor found Eskimos worshiping the frozen Captain as a mysterious god, in a fury, he threw the block of ice into the water, allowing for an American submarine to find and retrieve it, releasing Rogers from his prison. The world needed him again in the era of the Cold War and tensions in Vietnam. The king had to return. But while his return made him into a psychologically complex man out of time, constantly blaming himself for the alleged death of his teen sidekick Bucky, he is far less of an outsider than Superman is. At least Steve Rogers is human.

There are differences in how the two superheroes negotiate their respective Arthurian inheritance. Captain America is more of a nationalist hero than Superman, more in the vein of the Arthur of the Auchinleck (and present-day conceptions of Arthur as England's hero) while Superman has gone from "Truth, Justice, and the American Way" in the paranoid 1950s to a more inclusive mantra. In "Superman Returns," Daily Planet Editor-in-Chief, Perry White, asks his reporters to find out if the newly-returned hero still stands for "truth, justice … all that stuff." Superman has become more of a world hero, like contemporary versions of Arthur – the one that Hawthorne gestured at – who is not just a hero for England or France, but the United States and

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[229] Superman Returns. DVD. Dir. Bryan Singer. Perf. Brandon Routh, Kate Bosworth, and Kevin Spacey. Warner Home Video, 2006.

ostensibly the rest of the Western world as well. Witness as evidence the music in the intro to this paper, comic book covers in different languages, and the fact that stories of King Arthur have appeared in Latin, German, Welsh, French, English, Greek, Italian, Russian, and even Yiddish (*Widwilt* , a Yiddish reworking of the story of a character from Arthurian legend, Le Bel Inconnu).

One thing that both Captain America and Superman do share rather equally, however, is their staunch moral codes, which come directly from King Arthur, and is his distinct mark on this generation of heroes. It is this idea of a moral code which I contend separates the contributions of Arthur from the previous generation of heroes, and what marks this generation's superheroes as uniquely descended from Arthurian tradition.

Superman refuses to use lethal force and works within the law, to an extent. He is seen catching criminals and taking them to the beat officer in Superman (1978) and in the character study, Superman For Tomorrow, he bears tremendous guilt for a mass "Vanishing" of people from the Earth because of his unwelcome involvement in a Middle Eastern war, an involvement which caused the use of a Kryptonian weapon which at first seemed to blink millions of people out of existence, including his wife Lois Lane.[230]

Superman is so dedicated to remaining apart from the day-to-day history of the planet that he even refuses to vote, knowing that an endorsement from Superman would mean an endorsement of a certain party's ideology, not to mention certain victory for the party in

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[230] Brian Azzarello (w), Jim Lee (p), and Scott Williams (i). "Superman For Tomorrow." Superman #204-215 (2005), DC Comics.

question. This was a point no more poignantly made than when Superman's arch enemy, Lex Luthor, won the Presidency of the United States.[231]

Captain America's moral code includes a similar pledge not to kill, even though he is a soldier. He has no predilection for violence for violence's sake, even giving up his idealistic war with Iron Man over the Super Human Registration Act when he realizes that the people of New York are the ones suffering because of the constant super-powered clashes between his anti-Registration forces and Stark's pro-Registration heroes.[232]

Like Superman, Cap too has had his run-ins with politics. In one storyline, a third party nominates Captain America to run for President, but he declines the offer, preferring instead to fight for his idyllic America, not any one party's version of it.[233]

His moral code, which includes the pledge not to kill, clashes with other heroes in the Marvel Universe, no more so than with the lethal Punisher, a conflict which came to a head during Civil War. That conflict will be explicated in further detail later.

Steve Rogers' moral code even clashes with his employer, the United States Government, many times throughout his continuity, spurring him to give up the mantle of Captain America several times. It also puts him into conflict with his longtime friend Tony Stark during Civil War. The two in fact share a very special relationship, akin to that shared by Arthur and Lancelot before the adultery ugliness. Captain America, as the field general of the Avengers, has Stark as his first lieutenant. The figuration of the Arthur-Lancelot relationship is aided by the costumes

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[231] Jeph Loeb (w). "President Lex." Superman: Lex 2000 #1 (Jan. 2001), DC Comics.

[232] Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #7 (Mar. 2007), Marvel Comics.

[233] Roger Stern (w), John Byrne (w, p), and Joe Rubinstein (i). *Captain America* Vol. 1 #250 (Oct. 1980), Marvel Comics.

the two wear. Stark has already been typed as wearing a figuration of a knight's armor, but Rogers also wears a piece of medieval armor technology. The upper part of his costume, the torso, is described as being made of a chainmail-like material. While doubtlessly a more advanced version of the old technology, perhaps plated Dragon Skin armor, it is still referred to as chainmail.

Chapter 4
Universes of Heroes

> "When I look to the sky,
> something tells me you're here with me"
> --Train, *When I Look to the Sky*

But it is not only Superman and Captain America that fulfill these roles, and it is not only them that split up those same roles and follow in the moral footsteps of Arthur. Decades after Superman and Captain America first graced comic book pages, new universes of heroes had sprouted up, creating worlds in which the extraordinary was an everyday occurrence.

By the 1960s, legions of superheroes had developed, following in the steps of Captain America, Wonder Woman, the Flash, Captain Marvel, and Superman. That decade saw an explosion of superhero creation by Marvel Comics and DC Comics that displayed many of the same traits (Outsider, Boy King, Warrior King, Giant-Slayer) – to varying degrees – as King Arthur, Superman, and Captain America.

The great thunder god, Thor, makes a triumphant return to the popular imagination, still swinging his trusty hammer Mjolnir. In Journey Into Mystery #38, Marvel introduced what it dubbed "The Most Exciting Superhero of All Time!" and just like that, the Norse god of thunder was back. But he had a few alterations along the way.

In comic books, Mjolnir is, like Excalibur, a tester of worthiness and purity of heart. Inscribed on the hammer's head is a verse: "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor." Only the worthy can lift it, and among the worthy have been Captain America[234], Wonder Woman[235], and Superman.[236] Like Excalibur or the Sword in the Stone, it is a mark of office, of sorts. It is Thor's symbol, a mark of his history and his power, just as Captain America's shield comes to represent the ideals and the dream of a better America.

The hammer also has similarities to Captain America's shield in the tradition of Arthur's Excalibur. Cap's shield is made of indestructible vibranium, just as the hammer in the comics is made from the mystical metal Uru. The discus-shaped shield which Steve Rogers carries from Captain America Comics #2 on through to the present is also perfectly balanced, aerodynamic, and highly resilient, allowing it to return to its thrower off of a ricochet or through a skillfully planned flight path, just as Mjolnir always returns to Thor's hand.

But what about the four roles that the other heroes engage in? Marvel's Thor participates most discernibly in three of them. In Marvel continuity, the thunder god is sent away from Asgard (a kind of Norse Mount Olympus) as punishment for pride and vanity by his father Odin. Sent to Earth as a crippled doctor, Donald Blake, Thor is to learn humility and compassion, things that belong more in the moral code of Camelot than on the spires of Olympus. As a disabled human, he is far from the strapping, muscle-bound deity that he used to be. As an

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[234] Tom DeFalco (w), Ron Frenz (a), and Brett Breeding (i). "The Hero and the Hammer." Thor Vol. 1 #390 (Apr. 1988), Marvel Comics.

[235] Ron Marz (w), Peter David (w), Dan Jurgens (p), and Claudio Castelini (p). "The Showdown of the Century." Marvel vs. DC Vol. 1 #2-3 (Mar.-Apr. 1996), Amalgam Comics.

[236] Kurt Busiek (w), George Perez (a), and Tom Smith (colorist). Avengers/JLA #4 (Apr. 2004), DC Comics.

incomplete person, without full use of his legs, he is a societal outsider. He must carry the stigma of a physician who cannot heal himself.

Eventually, when Blake discovers that when he taps his cane on the ground he reverts to his Asgardian self, he finds himself dressed in full battle regalia, with a winged Norse helmet, tough leather boots, an armored tunic, and of course, Mjolnir, transformed from its earthly form as a simple walking cane. He transforms into the Warrior that Arthur, Alexander, David, Captain America, and Superman all are. He is the son of Odin, the "Allfather" and king of the gods, much like Hercules, and so is a prince, fulfilling the "King" part of "Warrior King," after Odin perishes.[237] As a Giant-Slayer, Thor battles many mythical giants, including his father Odin's old nemeses, the Frost Giants, the Asgardian monster Mangog,[238] and the God-Eater.[239]

Propp's spheres of action are quite prominent in Thor's story, particularly the Anti-Hero/ Usurper, the Dispatcher, and the Donor. Like King Arthur, Thor's greatest foe is a family member. Loki, the god of mischief and adopted son of Odin, constantly torments his older brother, who he sees as the favorite. On more than one occasion, Loki tries to take Thor's place at Odin's side, if he's not angling to take the throne of Asgard itself.[240]

Thor's Dispatcher is his father, Odin, who sends Thor to Midgard (Earth) to learn humility, and as a result, become one of that realm's greatest defenders. The Donor in Thor's story are the dwarf smiths who forge his hammer, Mjolnir, out of the mystical metal Uru. It is

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[237] Dan Jurgens (w), Stuart Immonen (p), and Joe Bennet (p). "Death of Odin." Thor Vol. 2 #39-44 (Sept. 2001-Feb. 2002), Marvel Comics.

[238] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a). Thor Vol. 1 #154 (Jul. 1968), Marvel Comics.

[239] Alan Zelenetz (w) and Bob Hall (a). "Dawn of the Gods!" Thor Annual #10 (1982), Marvel Comics.

[240] Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), and Bill Everett (i). "The Fall of Asgard!" Thor Vol. 1 #175 (Apr. 1970), Marvel Comics.

Thor's hammer that gives him his power and control over thunder and lightning. Without it, Thor is powerless.

The first Flash, Jay Garrick, debuted in January of 1940 with a winged helmet evocative of Mercury, and fought elemental and monstrous foes that would seem to be at home in the world of Arthuriana. One of the foes he battles is a giant spider-like creature with the head of a man.[241] The Flash's chevron has always been a bolt of lightning, but instead of some interpretations of the previous names of Excalibur as 'hardened-lightning,' the Flash eventually becomes anything but hardened – he becomes speed and light itself in the future world of the series Kingdom Come.[242]

The Flash fulfills the Warrior role in his second incarnation – that of police officer Barry Allen, who takes the mantle after being doused with crime lab chemicals whose containers were shattered by a bolt of lightning.[243] Like the young Arthur, Allen is a sideline player in the world of battle. He is a slow-footed crime lab officer, who idolized the previous Flash, Jay Garrick, a college football star.

When Barry Allen died saving the Earth from the Anti-Monitor in the Crisis storyline, his young nephew, Wally West, graduated from Kid Flash to take the mantle of his uncle, thereby fulfilling the Boy King role. Though young and sometimes immature, he is nonetheless a hero, having become one after being a squire of sorts to Barry Allen's Scarlet Speedster.[244]

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[241] Gardner Fox (w) and Sheldon Moldoff (p). Flash Comics #24 (Dec. 1941), All-American Publications.

[242] Mark Waid (w), Alex Ross (a). "Strange Visitor." Kingdom Come #1 (May 1996), DC Comics. pp. 41.

[243] Phil Jimenez. "The Flash." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

[244] Ibid

A sampling of Propp's spheres of action within the Flash text brings the story of the multi-generational hero into the realm of folktale inhabited by Captain America, Superman, and King Arthur. Echoing Propp's assertion that the roles can be performed by multiple personae, and that multiple roles can be fulfilled by a single persona, the Flash's most significant Villain and False hero/Anti-hero/Usurper comes in the form of Professor Zoom and the Reverse Flash, each of whom don costumes that have inverted color schemes to that of the Flash. While the dominant color in each of the Flash's incarnations has been red, with accents of yellow and white, both Professor Zoom and the Reverse Flash wear costumes with the dominant color being yellow, accented by red and black.

The first of these, the Reverse Flash, appeared in Flash Vol. 1 #139 (1963), and hailed from the 25th century. He was obsessed with the 20th century's second Flash, Barry Allen, and so tried to duplicate his powers, thereby fulfilling the "pursuit" requirement of the Villain sphere of action. He attempts to win the heart of Allen's wife, iris, and then in his rage, apparently murdered her (though she survived somehow as a denizen of the 30th century).[245]

Zoom was once Hunter Solomon, a close friend of Wally West, the third Flash. A series of tragedies caused him to don the same reverse-costume as Reverse Flash, and he came to terrorize West and his family. His attack on West's wife, Linda Park, caused her to miscarry the twins that she was carrying. Because of his own history of tragedy, Solomon believed that dealing with such tragedy would make the Flash a better hero. His delusions were partially correct, though misguided. After seeing how his deranged doppelganger hurt his family, West

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[245] Daniel Wallace. "Reverse Flash." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

wished that the world could forget his secret identity, a wish granted by the omnipotent hero Spectre.[246]

Another Propp sphere present in the Flash mythos is the Donor. Though in this case, the donor is not human, it is still characterized by mystical and transcendental properties. The Flash's ability to move at lightning quick speeds was not granted by simple electro-chemical reactions. Instead, it is revealed that the Speedforce, an ancient, abstract, omnipresent entity which powers all super-speedsters. That is the Donor which gave all three Flash's their powers.[247]

The DC hero who eventually becomes the Spectre which grants Wally West's wish is none other than one of the universe's emerald-clad vassals, the Green Lantern. The original Green Lantern, Alan Scott, debuted in All-American Comics #16 (July 1940), and had as his base Gotham City, the nighttime aerie of the shadowy Batman. His green power ring had mystical origins and was powerless against materials made of wood – very earthy concepts not too far removed from the magical realm of Arthur and Merlin. In time, the title fell out of favor and was canceled. But when DC began to streamline and update some of its old titles in the 1950s, Green Lantern made his return in the form of a Warrior, Hal Jordan.

A hot-shot test pilot, Jordan came across a downed UFO during one of his flights. Investigating, he found a dying purple-skinned alien dressed in a black and green suit. In an echo of the worthiness tests presented by Excalibur, Captain America's shield, and Thor's hammer, the alien, Abin Sur, decrees that Jordan is pure of heart, and that he must carry on the

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[246] Daniel Wallace. "Zoom." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

[247] Phil Jimenez. "The Flash." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

legacy of the Green Lantern Corps, thereby making him an intergalactic Warrior. As the Proppian Donor Sur expires, he hands Jordan a glowing green ring shaped like a miner's lantern, and Jordan immediately transforms into the newest – and most popular – incarnation of the hero.[248]

As part of the oath taken to become a Green Lantern, Jordan must recite an oath that owes its existence, as do the moral codes of Captain America and Superman, to the text of Arthuriana:

> In brightest day, in blackest night,
> No evil shall escape my sight
> Let those who worship evil's might,
> Beware my power … Green Lantern's light!

Jordan's incarnation of the Green Lantern owes as much to Proppian spheres of action as he does to Arthuriana. He has Magical Helpers in the form of the other members of the Green Lantern Corps, who come to aid Jordan in times of need, as he comes to aid them. Each is powered by a seemingly magical (though they are now explained to be of alien origin) power rings. The Dispatchers of Jordan and the other Lanterns are the keepers of the main power battery, located on the world of Oa. These are the Guardians of the Universe, and the creators of the intergalactic Green Lantern Corps.[249]

Somewhat a rarity among some of the more ancillary heroes, Jordan's Green Lantern fulfills the difficult Princess and Her Father sphere as well. His love interest, Carol Ferris, is the heiress to the Ferris Aircraft company, which Jordan works for, and therefore quite the Princess.

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[248] John Broome (w), Gil Kane (p), and Joe Giella (i). "Menace of the Runaway Missile." Showcase Comics #22 (Oct. 1959), DC Comics.

[249] Phil Jimenez. "Green Lantern Corps." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

She prefers Jordan's alter ego to him, though I argue, that, like Lois Lane, this allows her to fulfill the action of hero identification. Instead of identifying a false hero or usurper, she identifies the true hero within Jordan, though fails to make the connection.

Speaking of the False Hero, there is no greater a villain for a Green Lantern than one who has forsaken his vow and gone rogue, and in Jordan's case, it is his former best friend, Sinestro (seriously, if this wasn't comic book fare, he should have seen that one coming. Just look at that name!). Sinestro breaks from the Corps and forms a corps of his own – the aptly named Sinestro Corps. His yellow-powered Lanterns fight the Green Lanterns, with Jordan at the head. Jordan must eventually defeat his former friend and mentor, and bring him to justice.[250]

Then there is the so-called Armored Avenger, Iron Man, who first appeared in Tales of Suspense #39, in March of 1963. Mortally wounded in the jungles of Vietnam, billionaire weapons manufacturer Tony Stark is forced to engineer a weapon for his Viet Cong captors, but instead constructs a lifesaving pacemaker for himself and integrates it into a suit of armor, which allows him to escape. Stark is a billionaire capitalist, wealthy beyond imagination, and is a modern "king" in America, if you will.[251]

One of Stark's recurring villains is a nod to some of the more common villains of medieval romance – the fire breathing dragon. Fin Fang Foom – a fire-breathing dragon-like alien – is not too far of a leap from the knights slaying dragons to save the damsel in distress.

Stark wears state-of-the art armor which has advanced in complexity and design over the years. However, the idea of an armored hero has remained constant. And that armor is, in many

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[250] Phil Jimenez. "Sinestro." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

[251] In the 2008 film, Iron Man, Jeff Bridges' Obadiah Stane refers to Stark as a "prince" and is said to lust after Stark's "throne" at the head of Stark Industries.

iterations, very similar to medieval plate armor that would be placed on Arthur's character by later redactors of Arthurian mythology. Stark's armor consistently employs a chest and back plate assembly similar to medieval knight's plate armor, armored boots and gauntlets, an under-layer similar in function to chainmail (but far more advanced), circular guard plates at the hip joints (again, similar to various medieval suits of armor), and in 1998, he even wore armor explicitly styled after medieval suits of armor.[252] Stark is, in very real terms, a modern day knight in shining armor. A further investigation of Stark's past reveals that this fascination with armor has a familiar source. While relating a brief biography of Stark in 2009's "Iron Man: Requiem" comic, writer Michael Hoskin states that "after reading Thomas Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur," Tony was entranced by its tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table."[253] Like the Arthur of the Auchinleck, Stark fights the enemies of his nation – the consummate "other," represented in *Of Arthour and of Merlin* as the Saracens. Stark battles Communists from Vietnam and the villainous spurned Chinese noble, the Mandarin.

Unlike Captain America, Stark is hardly a soldier. He is more akin to the arms manufacturer who touches off the South American war in Action Comics #1, a man that Superman brings to justice. However, the fact that Stark constructs highly advanced weapons for the military, and the fact that once he dons his armor, he appears very similar to a medieval knight in full armor, are enough to apply the mantle of Warrior King. Why king? Because Stark is a throwback to the great railroad barons of the 19th century – he lives opulently, spends wildly, and has legions of employees and resources at his beck and call. He is a corporate kingpin. The

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[252] Kurt Busiek (w), George Perez (w), and Al Vey (i). "Once an Avenger…" Avengers Vol. 3 #2 (Mar. 1998), Marvel Comics.

[253] Michael Hoskin. "Iron Man: Requiem" (Dec., 2009). Marvel Comics.

only thing truly separating Stark from those robber barons and corrupt corporate pirates is that he uses his money and his acumen to fight evil as the Armored Avenger.

So how is a story about a man dressed in high-tech battle armor akin to the concept of folktale? Let's look at how Propp's spheres of action apply. First, there is of course the villain, who pursues the hero. Obadiah Stane, a business rival of Stark's, lusts after Stark's money and his company, even going so far as to break him down psychologically, causing him to relapse into alcoholism.[254] What about the donor? Isn't Stark a genius in all of the sciences? The donor of that gift would seem to be simple biology. But in fact biology is Stark's enemy, as his heart is pierced by shrapnel during an explosion, a condition that requires him to build his first life-sustaining suit of armor, the steel-gray Mark I suit. The true donor in Stark's life would be the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Ho Yinsen, who helped a dying Start construct that Mark I armor to escape North Vietnamese warlord Wong-Chu, who tasked Stark with building him the ultimate weapon. Little did Wong-Chu know that Stark would use that ultimate weapon against him.[255]

Iron Man's stories are chock full of Proppian spheres of action, all intertwined. While traditionally, Iron Man occupies the sphere of the Hero, when he first lapses into alcoholism in the "Demon In a Bottle" storyline (Iron Man #128, 1978), his trusted ally, Marine pilot Jim Rhodes, takes over the mantle of Iron Man while Tony Stark recuperates. The Iron Man suit, however, was calibrated for Tony Stark's brainwaves, and after a time, Rhodes was driven insane by the dissonance, and it took a rehabilitated Tony Stark donning one of his old suits of armor to save his old friend. As thanks for taking on the Iron Man duties while he was away, Stark gave

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[254] Peter Sanderson. "Stane, Obadiah." The Marvel Encyclopedia, 2006.

[255] Andrew Darling. "Iron Man." The Marvel Encyclopedia, 2006.

Rhodes, the former Usurper, his own suit of armor specially tailored for Rhodes' brainwaves. Dubbed War Machine for the new armor's load of weaponry, Rhodes became a hero in his own right. In that way, Stark himself fulfills the role of Donor that Ho Yinsen once fulfilled for him.

DC's most prominent Donor and Magical Helper, visually a nod to the Arthurian Donor/ Magical Helper – Merlin – is the white-bearded wizard Shazam, who first appeared in Whiz Comics #2 in February, 1940. The wizard gives to a young paper boy Billy Batson a gift equal to if not greater than that given by Jor El to his son by virtue of Kryptonian DNA – the power to become the Earth's mightiest mortal, Captain Marvel. Billy Batson is a Boy King if ever there was one. He remains a young boy, then a teenager, and subsequently a young man throughout his comic history, but by shouting one word – the wizard's name – he becomes a superhero that can go toe-to-toe with Superman's physical gifts. Shazam also functions as the Captain Marvel story's Dispatcher. Shazam had been the champion of mankind for millennia, and as he was aging, he needed a replacement. His charge to the young orphaned paper boy is to be that champion. He exhorts Batson to uphold the cause of good and to battle the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, thereby giving Marvel his mission.[256] Though Marvel appears as a man in his mid-thirties, the charm of the character comes from the boy inside. It is Billy Batson's idealism, moral code, and hope that contrast with the dark Batman's cynicism and the jaded adult worldviews that other superheroes possess.

His chevron is the lightning bolt, harkening back to Thor and to Zeus. But he is linked to Christian iconography in the series Kingdom Come, when his return to heroism after years of mind control is heralded by a verse from Revelations 10:3:

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[256] Scott Beatty. "Captain Marvel." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

> "and he cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth, and when he cried, seven thunders uttered their voices."

Like Arthur – who similarly made the leap from Pagan tradition to Christian hero, Captain Marvel is a warrior. The letters that make up the name Shazam, which Billy Batson must yell to become Marvel, is, as I have stated earlier, an acronym for the powers that he possesses, and the earlier heroic figures from which they come. The first A stands for the courage of the Greek warrior, Achilles.

Though Marvel has many foes, his most constant – and the one most tied into the orphaned Batson's traumatic past – is Black Adam, the former wielder of Shazam's great gift. An ancient Egyptian prince, the erstwhile Teth-Adam received his powers from a mystical scarab imbued with Shazam's magic. Though the acronym's letters stood for other figures (Egyptian gods), the powers were the same. However, Teth-Adam became corrupt, and turned to evil Shazam stripped Adam of his powers and the amulet was then entombed with Pharaoh Ramses II, until 20th-century archaeologists C.C. and Marilyn Batson – Billy's parents – uncovered it. They were then murdered by Teth-Adam reincarnate, Theo Adam. Theo became Black Adam, and donned a costume that was a dark mirror of Captain Marvel's. Like Mordred, this Villain/ Usurper is depicted as having dressed in black.[257] As an unconscious nod to the fact that the throne was not rightly Mordred's (early on in Arthurian tradition his name is associated with treachery and usurpation)[258], Black Adam's outfit does not feature the cape that hangs around Marvel's neck, a richly-adorned royal cape. Instead, Adam's costume includes cold metal

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[257] Julek Heller's painting "Mordred" (1990); H.J. Ford's illustration, "Sir Mordred" (1902)

[258] By the time Geoffrey pens Historia, there is already a tradition of the two as opposing forces, according to (Raymond H. Thompson. "Mordred." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.)

armbands, and his close-cropped hair forms a widow's peak, enhancing his pointed-ear devilish appearance.[259]

Another hero haunted constantly by a dark mirror Usurper/Villain is Marvel's teenage web-slinger, Spider-Man, who bears perhaps the most obvious moral code in the vein of King Arthur's. The line most often associated with Webhead, as he is affectionately called by other heroes, is one penned by Stan Lee, who still maintains he has no clue where it came from: "With great power must also come great responsibility."[260] The first character to say this to Parker is his doomed caretaker, Uncle Ben, who inadvertently gives Spider-Man his mission and his task, thereby fulfilling the role of Dispatcher.[261]

Peter Parker was an ordinary high school student before he had his fateful encounter with an irradiated spider. Ordinary insofar as he is awkward, alienated, and uncoordinated. In the United States, a country founded without the titles of nobility the Founding Fathers refused to inherit from England, there can be no true "kings." Instead, the everyman is made into a king. Every man (at least rhetorically) has a vote, a say in the government. Any person (as long as you're a white male from a wealthy family, but I digress), ostensibly, can grow up to be President of the United States. What better an Everyman can there be than one who had a near-universally awkward high school experience. Peter Parker is like the creators of Superman – most decidedly not the popular kid. But at 15 years old – close to the ages of King Arthur (12-17), King David

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[259] Robert Greenberger. "Black Adam." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

[260] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. DVD. Dir. Steve Kroopnick. Perf. Peta Wilson, Denny O'Neil, Jim Steranko, Michael Chabon, Will Eisner, Mike Richardson, Kevin Smith, Frank Miller, Bradford Wright, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Joe Quesada, Avi Arad, and Neil Gaiman. The History Channel, 2003. 41:37.

[261] Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), and Steve Ditko (a). Amazing Fantasy #15 (Aug. 1962), Marvel Comics.

(12), and Alexander the Great (20) when they rose to prominence – Parker got lucky. He was the victim of the best bug bite in the history of bug bites.[262]

As a social outcast, he's the perfect Outsider. Not only is he a kid, but a geeky kid at that. He has girl problems, school problems, and work problems. As a freelance photographer for the Daily Bugle, he must take pictures of himself as Spider-Man for money, pictures which Editor-in-Chief J. Jonah Jameson uses to publicly defame Parker's alter ego. Talk about a conflict of interest. Despite his weak and scrawny nerd trappings, Parker is in incredible physical condition as a result of his arachnid encounter. He uses his physical gifts (the proportional strength of a spider) to battle many foes, both large and small. Viewed by much of the general public as a criminal (and a menace, as his battles often cause great amounts of collateral damage to property) as often as he is viewed as a hero, he is an unappreciated Warrior.

Among those enemies great and small, of course, come some pretty tall tasks for the itsy-bitsy spider. Enormous, muscle-bound super-criminals such as the tough-skinned Rhino and Peter Parker's own professor-turned-humanoid Lizard Doctor Kurt Connors constantly pursue the web-slinger, making his professional and personal life a living hell as he struggles to keep the two separate. While there is no lack of villains in Spider-Man's rogues gallery, his most persistent, and most complex, is the alien symbiote known as Venom.

During a storyline known as the Secret Wars, Spider-Man's costume is torn. Seeing as other superheroes have gained replacement garments from an alien machine, he attempts to operate it. What comes out is a black ball of goo, which immediately envelopes Parker, appearing as a black skintight suit with a white spider insignia stretching across his chest and

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[262] Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). "Captain America Goes Underground." Civil War #2, p. 21 (Jun. 2006), Marvel Comics.

back. Ignorant of the true nature of this "new suit," Spider-Man battles on, finding his abilities and emotions enhanced. Over the next few months, the suit slowly tries to take over Parker, taking him on nocturnal adventures which Parker is unaware of in the morning, though he realizes that he is suffering from exhaustion. When it is revealed that the suit has a mind of its own, Parker uses sonic waves from church bells to drive the creature from his body.[263]

In the mean time, Parker's dark mirror, Eddie Brock, begins work as a reporter for the Daily Bugle. Brock is very much like Parker in many ways, though more ambitious. He uncovers the "true" identity of a renowned serial killer in an investigative piece for the Bugle, becoming Jameson's favored employee in the process. During one of Spider-Man's exploits, Parker reveals that the true killer was not brought to justice, and that Brock's story was a fabrication. Brock is shunned by the journalism community and loses his job. As if that wasn't enough, he is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Furious at Spider-Man, blaming the hero for his misfortunes, Brock is in the same church on the same night that Parker uses the bells to free himself from the black suit. The black goo drips down the bell tower and onto Brock, healing his cancer and giving him knowledge of Spider-Man's true identity. Seeing that Spider-Man and Peter Parker are one in the same, Brock becomes the ferocious Venom, garbed in the same black suit as Spider-Man had once been, but far more muscular and with a grotesque, twisted grin full of razor-sharp teeth and a slimy serpentine tongue.[264] Venom has become one of the most popular villains/Usurpers/Anti-heroes in all of comics. Visually impressive and psychologically involved directly with the hero, the image of Venom is one that begs a question of other

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[263] "Venom." Marvel Directory. MarvelDirectory.com. 3 May 2008 <http://www.marveldirectory.com/individuals/v/venom.htm>.

[264] Peter Sanderson. "Venom." The Marvel Encyclopedia, 2006.

superheroes: what would have happened if everything had gone wrong? He is a dark commentary on the nature of do-gooder superheroes, and, like Black Adam, an unconscious inheritor of the legacy of Mordred, the black-clad bastard product of King Arthur's unknowing incest in later redactions. Like Arthur, Mordred is begot through magic and deception, but is still the son of the king. The question that he asks is why should he be considered less of an heir than his father? The answer that Venom provides is that while Spider-Man and King Arthur have dedicated themselves to pro-social missions and to acts of heroism despite the difficulties they may involve, Mordred and Venom lust for power and revenge. Their origins are shrouded in anger, hate, resentment, and fear.

Other than Parker, perhaps the best examples of the Outsider, and the victims of such anger, hate, resentment, and fear are Marvel's mutant superheroes, the X-Men. They have the misfortune to be very special, yet still ostracized and feared. They are an up-front allegory for prejudice, racism, hate, and fear. Yet, despite their status as social outcasts, they still work for their mentor's dream of peaceful coexistence.

Being ostracized as they are, they share a kinship with Parker in the sense that they are, despite remarkable abilities, representative of the Everyman in the United States. In a country of immigrants and minorities, the X-Men, whose mutant powers manifest at puberty (fulfilling the Boy King role) represent what it's like to categorically not belong. Not only are Marvel's mutants feared as uncontrollable children with potentially deadly abilities, but as they become adults, they must constantly negotiate their mission to help human beings with the fact that while many may need help, they refuse to accept it from a 'dirty mutant.' Their attempts to help people

are often viewed by onlookers as attempts to hurt or murder, making their jobs even more difficult.[265]

The role of the Giant-Slayer manifests itself when the X-Men battle the villain Apocalypse, an Egyptian once known as En Saba Nur in the age of the Pharaohs, who can increase his size to gigantic proportions at will and is one of the most threatening and omnipresent villains in the X-Universe. Nur's apocalyptic nom de guerre recalls the giants from Revelations, battled by both Alexander and Arthur: Gog and Magog.

As far as Proppian spheres of actions go, the X-Men have some interesting yet workable takes apart from the classical dispatcher Prof. Charles Xavier. The Donor in the case of the X-Men is not a specific character, but rather genetics. The Marvel mutants gain their powers by virtue of the so-called recessive X-gene passed down from parents to children.

Their Magical Helper is the machine Cerebro, which enhances the powers of psychically-gifted mutants and allows the wearer to find any mutant anywhere on the planet if they concentrate hard enough.[266]

The Princess and Her Father function is fulfilled by the psychic Jean Grey for her husband and X-Men field general, Scott Summers (Cyclops). When Summers is fused with the spirit of Apocalypse, it is Jean who tracks down the memory-wiped X-Man and, with the help of their son Nathan (Cable), removes the presence of Apocalypse from him, thereby identifying the true hero within.[267]

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[265] Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. Marvels 10th Anniversary Edition. New York: Marvel Publishing, 2004.

[266] Peter Sanderson. "X-Men." Marvel Encyclopedia. 2006.

[267] Alan Davis, Terry Kavanagh, et al. (w), Roger Cruz, Rob Liefeld, et al. (p). "The Twelve." Uncanny X-Men Vol. 1 #377 (Jan.-Feb. 2000), Marvel Comics.

The false hero/anti-hero is none other than Magneto, Prof. Xavier's polar opposite, who believes not in the unification of mankind and mutantkind, but rather a war of Darwinian survival. At times, he seems rehabilitated and even joins the X-Men or takes over for his old friend Xavier, only to revert to his old ways.[268]

All of these heroes participate, in one form or another, in the Super Teams, modern iterations of the Nine Worthies and the Knights of the Round Table. While the Knights may be all-too-familiar to modern readers, the Nine Worthies are admittedly rather obscure (but then again, so is the Auchinleck, outside of scholarly circles). First written of in the 14th century by Jaques de Longuyon in his *Voeux du Paon* (1312), this group was composed of three pagans (Alexander the Great, Hector of Troy, and Julius Caesar), three Jews (Judah Maccabee, Joshua, and King David), and three Christians (King Arthur, Charlemagne, and a crusading Flemish knight named Godfrey of Bouillon). Notable among these members, of course, are Arthur, Alexander, and David.

Modern super-teams, such as DC's Justice League of America and Marvel's Avengers, consistently have the most Arthurian characters at the lead – Superman and Captain America, namely. That being the case, it is no accident that many of the meetings of these teams occur, you guessed it, at a round table in the meeting chambers of the JLA's Watchtower and the Avengers Mansion.[269]

Marvel's Avengers are led by Captain America. The Avengers' constantly-changing ranks have included such pagan analogues as Thor (a member of the original Avengers), a morally

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[268] Tom Bevoort. "Magneto." Marvel Encyclopedia. 2006.

[269] Mark Waid (w), Alex Ross (a). "Truth and Justice." Kingdom Come #2 (Jun. 1996), DC Comics.; Grant Morrison (w). Justice League of America #16 (Apr. 2005), DC Comics.; "Avengers mansion." Marvel Directory. MarvelDirectory.com. 3 May 2008 < http://www.marveldirectory.com/miscellaneous/avengermansion.htm>.

ambiguous hero named Ares, and the son of Zeus himself, Hercules. Thor and the Hulk, who was briefly a member, share with Judah the image of the hammer, which is what Maccabee means in Hebrew. Large, powerful heroes who rely on sheer force are often referred to, in the context of super-teams, as the "hammer." Other members have included Iron Man (in all his knightly glory), Hawkeye the archer, the android Vision, the magical mutant Scarlet Witch, and her brother Quicksilver, who's blinding speed evokes Mercury and Hermes.

The Justice League, headed by Superman, itself has several analogues that can be compared to the Nine Worthies. Captain Marvel possesses the Wisdom of Solomon, the Flash and Wonder Woman evoke pagan imagery (Mercury and the Amazons, respectively), and the Superman-styled Steel, who's main weapon is a hammer, evokes Judah's sobriquet.

When Captain America returns from his icy sleep, he is immediately put in charge of the Avengers because of his tactical brilliance. Bearing his Caliburnian shield, he leads the Avengers into battle against the rampaging Emerald Giant, the Hulk, with his famous cry: Avengers Assemble! The Once and Future King is indeed, alive and well.

Chapter 5
Random Notes of Parchment

> "On random notes of parchment I'm scrawling my existence,
> Dressed in white. This candle radiates throughout the night
> And it's never burning out, Never burning out."
> --The Ataris, *Unopened Letter to the World*

OK, you may be thinking, where can he go with this? Random notes of parchment? Haven't we already discussed scribal culture? Ah, but the random notes of parchment that I refer to are not literal. They are figurative. They represent what comes out when the text has fissured, split open, and allowed us to glimpse inside. They represent both what is inside the text

implicitly and what floats around the text in the air: the ephemera surrounding King Arthur and comic book superheroes. It is these such random notes of parchment, these random expressions of culture and of cultural knowledge, that give texture and depth to the similarities between comic book superheroes and the tales of King Arthur. Attributes, character similarities, and cultural proximity aren't enough to assert that the heroes of our day draw their paternity from the stories of Arthur. There must be something deeper, something more inherent and more basic, something in the air or the water.

Geertz's work helped to access that something deeper, widening "the range of the imaginative constructions to be interpreted." What Geertz touched on, perhaps inadvertently, was a theory of ephemeral knowledge, of a shared consciousness. It is this idea that draws the Text of Arthur incredibly close to the Text of comic book superheroes. Geertz's thick descriptions of cultural texts – and comic books certainly are that – strengthened an insistence that "the things that draw us to literature are often found in the non literary, that that concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation and revision."[270]

The problem with this so-called "non-literary" is determining precisely what it is. For instance, do an author's notes in preparation for a work count as literary, as part of the work? What about his reading list? What about the newspapers he read every morning? Or, God forbid, what about the Internet? Each of these things has one central element – it is associated with a single author. The idea of the author gives readers such an impossible list, making the assembly of a work – much less a text – a futile project. Editors worry more about the flotsam

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[270] Ibid, 30

and jetsam associated with the man rather than with the subject matter. Literature is taught without much historical context and history is taught with literature as a footnote. Michel Foucault stated once that at some point, "we began to recount the lives of the authors rather than of heroes."[271] But the solution is one that Barthes suggests – a death of the author, a fading into obscurity of the writer and an ascent of the reader. But this death is not recent. It has only just reoccurred. In the days when Arthurian legend was being forged, the author had never even really been alive, and likewise with comic books, there is no single author or Auteur – there is a staff of creative professionals who change in and out as the years progress. The "non-literary" that Geertz speaks of is that part of the stories that remains hanging in the air when one generation leaves in favor of another. It is in these "traces of that uninterrupted narrative" that the two ostensibly separate texts – that of Arthuriana and that of comic book superheroes – become one, in dialogue with one another. They are singular. They are contiguous. They are folk materiel, originally destined to exist upon vibrations of air, or for a brief 24-hour period as newsprint. In their corporeal forms, Arthuriana and comic books each were constructed by multiple hands – drawn by different architects. Their intrinsic forms at their tangible inception were identical, save for the difference between parchment and processed paper. Manuscripts in which Arthur appeared contained brightly colored pictures, called miniatures. Where are these in comic books? All over the place! The whole genre is a collection of echoes of those medieval manuscript miniatures. It doesn't matter who writes Arthur or Superman or Captain America because it is the story being told that matters, and those stories in particular have such a long and involved history by themselves and in concert that they are the main attraction, not the names on

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[271] Michel Foucault. "What Is an Author?" The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998. pp. 890.

the byline. Indeed, as David Newman, a writer for the first Superman film, said when asked why he would do such a childish movie: "Superman is our King Arthur. This is our legend. This is our version of pulling the sword from the rock."[272] It is a consciousness of what has come before, and the knowledge that we are participating in that very tradition, even as it is constantly changing.

What we often do not see because of our lack of historical perspective is the fact that the ways each of the Texts are produced, without a singular author but rather multiple custodians – enables each to adapt and find new ways to relate to our cultural and societal consciousness. As the hero stories evolve, Arthur included, the stories and themes become representative of the world around them. Arthur went from fighting Saxons to battling Scots and Danes in the Auchinleck because that was the reality of the time. He was no longer needed to fight the Saxons because they were already there as the English, and were in fact producing the Auchinleck manuscript.

Lex Luthor evolved from his mad scientist roots into a corporate magnate, a billionaire industrialist to fit the new evil of the 1980s. Again, because it was not a single constant author writing and illustrating the stories, the Text had a malleability, a fluidity. Superman even gained his weakness through the dissemination of authorship. Apart from the comic books, the Superman radio show in the 1950s decided to introduce glowing green radioactive pieces of Superman's homeworld as the one thing that could harm him. In reaction to newfound fears about atomic power and the Cold War, they called this radioactive mineral Kryptonite.[273]

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[272] You Will Believe, 10:38.

[273] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 12:36.

What makes these stories and Arthurian stories uniquely similar is the amount of cultural knowledge that exists beyond the margins of the pages of text or comic panels. Kryptonite may have been isolated to the Work of the radio program, but because of its resonance within the greater Text, it has now become canonical. Why haven't we realized that Arthur and superheroes were connected before? Because "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production. It follows that the text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constituitive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works)."[274]

The Text of Arthur and of the superheroes, as I hope I have proven, is continually reinvented and renegotiated to fit times and places and cultures. It is continually remade into different genres and classifications, fulfilling what Barthes required of a text – that it indeed resist traditional hierarchies and classifications. To experience a Text is to deal with the experience of limits – the "limits of the rules and of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)."[275]. Especially with Arthuriana and with comic books, we experience limitations on rules – particularly on the rules of plausibility, physics, and probability.

Foucault frights at the limitless possibilities of ephemera to be included in a singular author's work. The problem is that he only considers the Work, not the Text. For it is the Text that is truly limitless and delights in that limitlessness. It is that lack of limits that makes a Text a Text. Ephemera in the margins creates the possibility of social authorship, and so does time. Arthur became what he is because we've had time to keep revising him and turning the knobs until we get it just right. The same has been true of superheroes.

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[274] Barthes, 157

[275] Ibid

That idea of social consciousness, a kind of communal knowledge, informs on all parts of the greater superheroic Text. During the 1990s, several attempts were made to revisit the Superman film franchise. The ideas being thrown around – a black leather suit, an S shield that came off to form daggers – all seemed out of place. Modern, yes, but out of place with the sensibilities of the character of Superman. There is only so much modernization that these Texts can bear, and that is the beauty of them. They change with the times enough to stay relevant, but not so much as to ignore their roots.[276]

The film version of Krypton, Superman's home planet, affected how the planet was depicted in comics via a form of retrograde signaling. In that case, a comic book fan, Richard Donner, had a profound impact on the Text of Superman.

On the whole, superhero movies do not create such retrograde action. Many of them are successful precisely because they stay close to the source material – the ephemera, the rumor, the common conceptions of heroes. Mario Puzo, when he signed on to pen the script for that first Superman film, went into the DC Comics library and began looking through old Superman stories. Writers spent two days sitting with the author of The Godfather, discussing who the figure of Superman was over Havana cigars in the DC conference room.[277] He understood the fact that Superman was no one's property – he was everyone's. Even Donner forgot that at times.

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[276] You Will Believe, 1:36:00

[277] Ibid, 49:30

When the remainder of the filming for Superman II was given to director Richard Lester to helm after creative differences turned the relationship between Donner and producers Ilya and Alexander Salkind icy, Donner flipped.

"I was so pissed off, you can't believe it," Donner recalls. "I was ready to go back – obviously not asking for any more money; I'd been paid – and I wanted to go back and Tom and I wanted to go back and Tom and I had in our minds, the completion of II. We had a great idea – if II went well – we could do III and if it did anything we could do IV. But they chose to send me this telegram. I was ready to get on a plane and kill because they were taking my baby away from me."[278]

Above all, this was an argument over ownership, and authorship – an argument that cannot be had in relation to Arthur or to superheroes. Even when it is the companies that own the properties attempting to exercise ownership, there is an inevitable backlash, and it usually only harms the characters, the legacy. When artists and writers went off to war in World War II, "the publishers began to feel that they were in charge of these characters. The characters became corporate characters controlled more by the corporation."[279]

Superman really belongs to the people. Donner had the right idea but became possessive. Lester, who had directed "The Three Musketeers" (a French story) acted like the French redactors of King Arthur – he tried to stay close to the original version, but then added sex as a weakness – just as Arthur's kingdom was felled in French romance by Lancelot's relationship

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[278] You Will Believe, 59:43.

[279] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 25:50.

with Guinevere – when Superman gives up his powers to be with Lois – it's just a coincidence, but it is interesting in a six-degrees of separation kind of way.

But when casting for the first "Superman" film, Donner did get a lot of things right, including fighting tooth and nail to cast an unknown in the part of the Last Son of Krypton. Donner supported the casting of Marlon Brando in the part of Jor El, Superman's biological father, and Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor, Superman's perennial foe, because they would bring cache and credibility to the film.[280] But for the man in the tights, the face had to be a new one.

"You couldn't have a known actor, because that would just jump through the canvas," Donner said. "You couldn't have Robert Redford or Paul Newman flying. I really made it an issue that if we were going to do it, we had to have it be an unknown."[281]

Similarly, when Brian Singer was casting his Superman for the 2006 film "Superman Returns," he maintained that the character of Superman would have to step out of the audience's collective imagination.

"Superman has to look, feel, and sound as though he's stepped out of your collective consciousness of who that character is," Singer said.[282] Like Donner, he wanted a face that was Superman, not the face of a famous actor. He chose a Clark Kent of his own, 24-year-old Brandon Routh, a Midwest farm boy in his own right.

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[280] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 51:36

[281] You Will Believe, 24:46.

[282] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. 1:38:18.

"The fact that I came from a small town in the Midwest, which Clark actually did, makes a lot of difference with my portrayal and who I am," Routh said. "Bryan liked that I had Midwestern values. Everyone has values, but the Midwest gets a good rap for it."[283]

The casting of these unknowns in perhaps the most famous comic book role echoes the ascent of the literary Arthur character, who was likewise an "unknown" in the stories of the Sword in the Stone. He was an obscure squire, a boy who carried the armor of his foster brother, Sir Kay. He was the last person any of the knights assembled at the tournament would have predicted or foreseen to be the High King of all of Britain.

Another concept that is closely related to social authorship, but more at the distance of a cousin, is the idea of a cultural knowledge. Certain things have to be just such a certain way or else the story is unrecognizable. For the stories of Arthur and superheroes, other than specific elements of the respective stories (i.e. Excalibur, Merlin, and Guinevere for Arthur; Steve Rogers, the shield, being frozen in ice for Captain America; Lois Lane, Lex Luthor, and Last Son of Krypton for Superman), the most consistent elements are our old friends, the four roles.

Society it would seem, changes its heroes as society itself changes, but it latches onto some of the more iconic and timeless elements – like the four roles that superheroes inherit from Arthur who in turn inherits them from David and Alexander. This is why some superhero movies succeed and why others fail. In staying close to the source material, a film finds the resonance of the superhero. In departing from that source material, the unsuccessful films fall flat because they lack that very resonance, that sense of the iconic and the timeless.

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[283] Ibid, 1:39:27

Superman will always be the Last Son of Krypton, Captain America will always have his shield, the Green Lantern always will have his power ring, and Captain Marvel will always yell "Shazam!" to transform

The more things change, the more they stay the same, in effect. The look and the style may change (Superman's S shield has undergone a near constant transformation over his 70 years of existence), and so may the language and the medium (i.e. the technology of movie-making, television, radio, newsprint, etc.), and even the society may change around these stories, but some things remain constant. These stories somehow remain constant even with shifting subjectivities. Their elements, however, especially those they draw from Arthur, remain constant. This immutability must, however, be balanced with the fact that the Textual nature of Arthur and of comic book superheroes allows for each of the different cultures and societies and creators who touch the Texts add elements that become popular enough to be included in the great majority of redactions, and sometimes ring true enough that they become integral to the Text..

Arthur perhaps gained the idea of the Once and Future King from the idea of the restitutor orbis during the time that the first historical antecedents of Arthur were active in sub-Roman Britain. The dragon, the sword, the wizard – all additions of Sarmatian cavalrymen and native pagans, with a little bit of cultural memory thrown in from Welsh warrior tribes. Posited close to a historical origin point, it is no surprise that this one stuck.

By the time Arthur is compiled into the Auchinleck, the descendants of the Saxons have put English inscriptions upon the blade of Excalibur and send Arthur on crusades against the Danes, the Scots, and the Irish – the latter two being Arthur's former literary and likely historical

allies. Arthur then becomes typed as the "rightwise king born of all England," according to Malory's work, not the Britain from whence his story came.

The French redactors added romance and intrigue to the legend, introducing a steamy love affair between Arthur's wife and his most trusted knight. They turned former nephew Medraut into the incestuous Mordred, the product of Arthur sleeping with his half-sister. They added the quest for the Holy Grail, which has become central in many retellings of theArthurian legend.

But there always remained the core elements. You couldn't just get rid of the sword or Merlin. They could be changed and molded a little, but not too much, and could definitely not be completely eliminated. The Auchinleck, which while changing the nature of some of these elements, could not eliminate them entirely – though Excalibur and Merlin had pagan origins, and the scribes were engaged in creating an English, Christian king, they could not eliminate those elements because they were already so entrenched in the story that they had become an integral part of the story.

Scribal culture at the time that the Auchinleck was compiled, as well as during the rise of Arthurian stories, defined the way that the story continually changed, even when it had made the transition from a primarily orally-based tradition and onto the page. Witness how many different manuscripts exist of Geoffrey's Historia. Over 215 separate and distinct manuscripts exist, each with its own textual variance. Each different scribe lent his own handwriting to copying the text. Sometimes even the very contents and chronology change. Plot elements are omitted or altered. Because of geographical difference, dialects, spelling, and grammar are even variant. French

scribes, such as Wace and Layamon, purported to be 'translating' Geoffrey, but in fact added stories of their own. That's where the story picks up Lancelot, after all.[284]

But what is this "scribal culture" I keep speaking of? It can be summarized by several statements from Loomis' treatment of the Auchinleck. A necessary part of scribal culture is that there is no concept of individual authorship. "We know practically nothing about either the authors or the transcribers of those works," Loomis said. The defining feature of scribal culture is anonymity in production. Sometimes singing minstrels have been posited as authors, "sometimes as the oral "publishers," of much of this popular poetry, and the more important manuscripts have been generally attributed to monastic compilers and scribes."[285]

The first traditions of King Arthur were likewise transmitted orally, and probably originally as campfire tales or heroic songs in the vein of Homer's heroic epics, which were kept alive and added to over the centuries. It was impossible to distinguish between he who composed a work and he who performed it well into the time of the Auchinleck, because both were active in the creative process.[286] The stories were not first told by Homer, but he did participate in the already-old tradition of oral composition and transmission by creating his Iliad, and he was likely aware of this. In the centuries after Homer, "these songs were recited by bards and continually changed by them until, in the middle of the sixth century, (when) the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus had them joined together in their present form and written down."[287] This

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[284] Norris J. Lacy. "French Arthurian Tradition (Medieval)." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

[285] Loomis, 596

[286] Elizabeth Eisenstein, Elizabeth. The Printing Press as an Agent of Change : Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. pp. 121.

[287] De Vries, 3.

tradition of heroic song and oral composition did not die with Achilles. The means by which those epics were transmitted and created was alive and well in the tales of Arthur and his knights.

Comics may not be technically "folk" but they are in spirit – the medium which defines "folk" is verbal, never to be published, and in the same way comic books were originally printed on newspaper, meant to be thrown away after one read. The same thing happened during World War II – the recycling of paper is the reason that many paper products of that time period – baseball cards and comic books included – are so valuable today. They were meant to be consumed and discarded. They, like verbal communication, were a temporary medium.

The Auchinleck is not as richly adorned as other manuscripts of the period are. It was not meant to sit idly as a display piece.[288] It was meant to be used, to be performed, to be recited. It was meant to give life to a nascent English literary tradition. The oral tradition inherently associated with Classical heroes like Alexander and biblical heroes like King David, as well as the performative nature of manuscripts like the Auchinleck scream that they, like the earliest tales of King Arthur, were told not by the pen, but by the tongue.

The way the comic book genre itself is produced is very much like medieval scribal culture. Of course, there is no singular author. Instead, there are whole staffs of writers, creative teams, pencilers, inkers, and colorists. Just as Geoffrey's Historia exists in 215 manuscripts, so do comic books exist in multiple forms with slight variances. The en vogue thing to do as of late is to have mega events that cross into all of a given company's titles. To tell the entire arc of a single story, for example, Marvel's Civil War, one must read more than 100 separate books. There are not just single lines of comic books dedicated to any one set of heroes – no longer is

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[288] The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. July 2003. National Library of Scotland. 1 May 2008 < http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/physical.html>.

there just X-Men, but Uncanny X-Men, X-Factor, X-Calibur, Young Mutants, and Astonishing X-Men. And each of those books has its own roster of writers, etc.

Jerome Siegel and Joe Schuster came up with Superman, but they don't still write and draw him. They created him, but later artists and writers defined him in many different ways, some good and some bad. But the point is that, like King Arthur, Superman and the other superheroes evolve as writing and illustrating techniques involve, and as storytelling becomes more sophisticated.

From the director of *Watchmen* (2012) and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), Zach Snyder, in an interview on Big Talk Radio on Feb. 4, 2016, about the characters from DC comics portrayed in television shows like *The Flash*, *Arrow* and *Supergirl*, versus the characters from the same comic universe being portrayed on screen, in major motion pictures, as well as the same characters being played by different actors (emphasis mine):

> *"This is the bottom line for me. I have 100% respect and love for what they're doing on TV. I think it's amazing. The joy and the fun of them speaks to the iconic, graphic nature of these characters. These characters are bigger than any of the actors playing them.* ***Long after I'm done making a Batman v Superman movie, there will be someone else who makes it. It's almost like an American tradition now we've established that these characters will be played again and again, and they exist outside of us in this moment.****"*

Even the looks of comic books have changed with the times to the point where the art within them – if not the content quite yet – is considered true art. Witness the painted works of Alex Ross, who has made a living out of making dynamic, heart-stoppingly realistic portraits and comic panels of some of the comic book world's most iconic superheroes. Artists have also evolved to use color and shadow to set tone, as Jim Lee and Scott Williams did in the dark and brooding characterization of Superman in Superman For Tomorrow. Humans are visual

creatures, after all, and the look of the story is a large part of how the books are received. But this form takes its cues from its content. The look of comic books is finally catching up with the Arthurian legacy of their content. No longer are heroes rendered in the traditional four colors of news strips.

Apart from character similarities and mirrored modes of production and concepts of authorship, both comic books and Arthuriana deal and have dealt with prescient issues. Arthur went on Crusades and served the purpose he does in the Auchinleck – as a national emblem at a time when the nation needed one – he served as an allegory – he fought in the projected past the same dangers that the people writing him were facing, in some fashion.

Like Arthur, comic book superheroes have clashed against societal ills and contemporary issues facing the culture from which they arose. In 1971, the Nixon Administration requested that Stan Lee do a story about the dangers of drug addiction. Lee and artists Gil Kane and John Romita worked out a three-issue arc where Spider-Man battled the Green Goblin, and in the process, saves an inner-city kid so stoned that he thinks he can fly. Later on, Harry Osborne, Peter Parker's best friend and the son of Norman, the man behind the Green Goblin mask, gets hooked on pills and nearly dies from an overdose.

Months later, DC published a stronger story in which Speedy, the aptly-named former kid sidekick of Green Arrow, got hooked on heroin.[289]

Green Arrow's partner, the Green Lantern, famously dealt with accusations of racism in Green Lantern/Green Arrow #76 (April, 1970), when an African American man launched this invective against the Lantern: "I been readin' about you … how you work for the blue skins …

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[289] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. 54:32.

and how on a planet somewhere you helped out the orange skins … and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there's skins you never bothered with --! … The black skins!"

Marvel's X-Men deal with prejudice on a page-ly basis. Stan Lee calls it a "story of bigotry," one that appealed, when it first rose to prominence in the late 1960's and early 1970's, to any young person growing up different at the time. It appealed to religious minorities, racial minorities, sexual minorities – anyone under the sun. Avi Arad, head of Marvel Studios and the man responsible for movies such as the X-Men and Spider-Man trilogies, said that growing up in Israel and receiving re-prints of the X-Men comics, he could easily understand the metaphor: "It was about the right to live, the right to exist," a right which Arad, Lee (who's given name was Stanley Martin Lieber), Kirby (who's given name was Jacob Kurtzberg), and Siegel and Schuster – all Jews – understood all too well. Emma Frost, a key character in the X-Men world, confronted Tony Stark (Iron Man) during the Civil War event of 2006, which ripped the Marvel Universe in two. In response to his request to join the pro-Superhuman Registration Act ranks, Frost shoots back: "where were you when our babies were being killed?"[290] The registration act, for mutants, is a figurative number tattoo on the forearm. Because of the animosity in the Marvel Universe from homo-sapiens against homo-superiors, any registration of mutants could be far more dangerous than the registration of adult superheroes. While adult superheroes must worry about a supervillain getting a hold of their secret identities, mutants as a group – men, women, and children – would be known as mutants by a government which has proven all-too-fickle in mutant issues. It is an eerie and unsettling echo of the Third Reich, from which the parents of the aforementioned comic book legends had fled in the early 1930s.

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[290] Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #3, p. 21 (July. 2006), Marvel Comics.

The X-Men books presented the "idea of being simultaneously special and persecuted," according to Michael Chabon, author of the superhero novel The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay. This idea, as I have shown, is not new at all, though it was viewed as revolutionary in comic books.[291] In the aforementioned passages from the Arthur work and the Alexander work that appear in the Auchinleck (remember those?), the coronations of both the titular characters are marred by contempt and jealousy from fellow royals. In much the same way, the abilities that the Marvel mutants have – and never asked for, much as the young Arthur never asked to be the King – are cause for tension and friction with the un-powered human population.

Stark, who, in his guise as the armored Iron Man is the closest modern heroes get to a medieval knight, aesthetically speaking, deals not only with bigotry, but with alcoholism. The "Demon in the Bottle" storyline was one of the most popular of the Iron Man arcs, and showed that even superheroes can be vulnerable to their own successes, even pressured by them. The producers of this 2008's "Iron Man" film, in fact, capitalized on Stark's history of substance abuse when casting the lead. The notoriously-troubled Robert Downey, Jr. has had bouts with substance abuse himself, and when he was announced to be playing the billionaire playboy/ future alcoholic, fans of the character rejoiced, because Downey, Jr., would give depth and a sense of reality to the character because of their similarly addictive personalities. Much like Stark, it seems as if Downey, Jr. has gotten a hold on his addictions, but that constant pressure of the threat of a relapse hides behind the delivery of his lines.

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[291] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. 59:45.

But while superheroes have dealt with social issues for decades now, there have been two notable omissions from the pages of comic books. While Captain America was fighting Nazi soldiers and Japanese conspirators, a far greater evil was lurking behind the barbed wire of Fortress Europe: the horror of the Holocaust. Ironically enough, many of the writers and illustrators of comic books during the war years were of Jewish descent. Their families had fled Europe because of the rising tide of anti-Semitism, and yet, neither the quintessential immigrant Superman nor the man who was literally wrapped in America's ideals of freedom, Captain America, were ever depicted alongside the fearful tableaus of concentration camps. Later stories and books have inserted flashback episodes into Captain America's history that shows him liberating concentration camps (one X-Men television cartoon even showed Cap liberating the concentration camp which housed a young Eric Lensherr, the man who would later become Magneto), but even though stories were being passed back to the home front of Hitler's atrocities, not a single contemporary comic book put them on the page. The books of the time glamorized war and combat and "in the comic books, the Americans always won."[292] The true horrors of the war, and of the Holocaust, did not fit into this paradigm: "We felt the audience wouldn't be interested in that," said Will Eisner, the creator of the superhero, The Spirit. "They couldn't understand it."

While lack of understanding, or at least the perceived lack of one, prompted the see-no-evil approach of World War II-era comic book creators, it was a crushing weight of knowledge and understanding that colored how they treated a new kind of war – the one in Vietnam.

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[292] Ibid. 20:00

In the early 1960's, when comic book characters were still struggling under the weight of 1950's status-quo (in which Batman began carrying a platinum badge and Superman became the ultimate lawful authority), many characters were featured in Vietnam-themed stories. But as the decade progressed, and the protests and counter-culture began to acquire steam, superheroes disappeared from the Asian jungles. It became clear to comic book creators that this wasn't like World War II, when "we just could all see what a menace Hitler was," according to Lee. Vietnam was muddied and unclear. After the 1950's Captain America's run was cut short because it wasn't in line with the previously-idealistic and freedom-fighting persona, it became apparent to writers of the mid-1960's that maybe the government wasn't always right.

"After a while, I think we weren't that sure that 'Commies' were the greatest evil in the world," Lee said. "I tried to avoid stories about the war. The Vietnam War, to me, was too tragic a thing."[293]

But since the war, as illustrated with the examples of drug use in comics, attitudes about what comic books should address began to change. Like Arthur, who may have been a sub-Roman British warrior chieftain yet was depicted going on Crusades, fighting invading Saxons, and searching for the Holy Grail, superheroes began to inhabit our own real world. They were shown as living in real cities, with real geographies and real locations. Marvel's heroes preferred to stay close to the home office in New York. The Fantastic Four lived in the fictional Baxter Building, which became part of the Marvel New York's skyline and is located at the corner of 42nd Street and Madison Avenue. The Avengers Mansion, a city-block-sized complex, was located at 890 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, NY, and was inspired by the Frick Museum, a building

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[293] Ibid, 54:08

Stan Lee used to walk by on his way to work every day, located at 1 East 70th Street. So when, on an early September morning in 2001, two jet airliners crashed into the Twin Towers, the superheroes, like King Arthur, had to react to the real world.

The heroes, however, didn't go to war, as they did in the 1940's. This wasn't a war just yet. This was a rescue operation. This was something that hit home. Joe Quesada, now the Editor in Chief of Marvel, remembered his thoughts on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001: "No longer are two 110-story buildings falling to the ground the stuff of fantasy. We felt it. We were in New York when it fell. I felt the ground tremble." Bradford Wright, author of Comic Book Nation (2003), said that "no one could have imagined September 11 unless they read comic books … It sounded like a comic book plot, like something Dr. Doom would do."[294]

In the first Spider-Man film, editors had to delete a scene that showed Spider-Man spinning a web between the two World Trade Center towers. Spider-Man is the most visible of New York-based heroes, so the missing scene, the silence of which speaks volumes, was not the only representation of Web Head mourning his city. It felt only right that Spider-Man would be personally affected by the attacks, and as a tribute, the cover of Amazing Spider-Man #36 was left blank. On a black background, only the white masthead appeared. Inside, splash pages of the web-slinger viewing the destruction were haunting and fittingly wordless. "This picture of Spider-Man looking at Ground Zero, it's compelling, it's emotional," Arad said. "It represents all of us."[295]

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[294] Ibid, 1:22:20

[295] Ibid, 1:23:22

In a tribute comic, published jointly by Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, and Image, Superman stands in front of a billboard featuring doctors, fireman, soldiers, and police officers, and next to him sits his faithful dog Krypto, wearing his own red cape. The dog looks up at his master, as Superman looks up at the billboard. Kal El utters only one word: "Wow." The piece was based on a over from the old Justice Society of America, on which a young boy looks up at a similarly-presented billboard featuring the members of the Justice Society. The Superman frame represents a move from childhood to a harsh adult reality. Now even the innocent, sometimes childlike Superman, is humbled by the tragedy, and the real-life heroic responses to it, just as that boy was awed by the depiction of his heroes.

The resulting takes on the tragedy in comics were far different from World War II. Stan Lee opined that "it would be corny and in bad taste to have a cartoon character punching a Muslim in the face and saying 'We'll get you!' No, that wouldn't work."[296] Artist Jim Steranko created a poster, featuring Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch of the World War II super-team, the Invaders. It recalled the glory days of the war, when superheroes were enthusiastically united against their common enemy. Post-Sept. 11 comics could not, and did not have that. There was no single country against which to direct anger. No easy target. No more room for racialized propaganda in a modern, global economy. But there was still room for superheroes in a world that now, more than ever, needed them. It was a world of humbled heroes, but of heroes nonetheless. Like the historical Arthur, operating in the twilight of the Roman Empire, superheroes now faced the possibility that the American Way may not be *the* way, after all. As in the 1970's, heroes began questioning the government, and concentrating on

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[296] Ibid, 1:24:50

the people. Captain America even discovered that the United States government was funding terrorist activities, a revelation that began the deterioration – once again – of his relationship with the government that "owned" the uniform he wore.

Chapter 6:
Wings of the Hero

"You used to call my name every hour of every day
How I live to hear that sound
But every sound gets washed away
Out of the blue out into the loneliest place that you ever know.
I carried the world just as far as I could but the damage had taken its toll"
--Motion City Soundtrack, *The Worst Part*

"It may sound absurd, but don't be naïve
Even heroes have the right to bleed
I may be disturbed, but won't you concede
Even heroes have the right to dream.
It's not easy to be me."
--Five for Fighting, *Superman*

Alex Ross spent more time thinking of and preparing for what to do for the cover for Marvels #2, "Monsters Among Us," than any other issue of the miniseries. His first sketch was the X-Man, Angel, flying away from a mutant-hunting Sentinel robot.[297] But then he changed his mind.

The mutant known as Angel, a character named Warren Worthington III, first used his mutation (large, bird-like white wings protruding from his shoulder blades and flight-tailored physiology) to save some of his schoolmates from a school fire. Dressed in a nightshirt and a blond wig, he was mistaken for a divine angel by onlookers as he flew away. Ross abandoned

[297] Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. Marvels 10th Anniversary Edition. New York: Marvel Publishing, 2004. pp. 390.

the fleeing cover for one that came closer to evoking what those onlookers must have felt. His next sketch showed a frosted-lens view of Worthington, gaze tilted upward, wings outstretched, holding a mutant child in his arms, saving her from a hostile crowd.[298]

Ross used watercolor and gouache paints to create a "transparent and opaque" image that seemed at once divine and yet threatening, with rocks and other missiles being hurled at the airborne mutant from the mob below.

But the image, that of an angel coming to save a child in need, is widely considered one of Ross's most iconic and touching works. It shows a superhero for what they are to many who read their stories – mortal angels. For their entire history, superheroes – like Arthur before them – have retained a very strong religious trope.

One of Ross's most famous subjects – though he has produced mountains of work for both major comic publishers – has been Superman, perhaps the character most heavily invested with those religious tropes. The book Mythology (2003), which depicts much of Ross's art for DC Comics, intersperses several pictures of drawings that he made as a child. The majority of them contain Superman. Ross got his start drawing the Man of Steel … in crayon. And so it is that the recent popularity explosion of superhero movies got its start with the Big Blue Boy Scout back in 1978.

Superhero movies today started with the release of "Superman" in 1978, and can still be said to be negotiating the same issues that film did. Because of the weight that was explicitly involved in translating such a venerable character to film, as well as the weight of the history

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[298] Ibid

behind the genre (after all, one of the screenwriters, David Newman, did admit to recognizing a touch of the Arthurian in Superman), the Text of superhero movies is still open.

The problem with Superman is that he is almost a god. Not only is he nigh-omnipotent, but he also echoes the two biggest figures in the Bible apart from God Himself: Moses and Jesus. Why is this a problem? Recall that the reason that Arthur and the heroes that came immediately before him could be heroic because they were mortal – they could risk some kind of harm. The same goes for superheroes. They need to be able to put something at risk. They cannot be gods. They have to be human in a world where a Judeo-Christian God exists.

Religion, in the form of crusading narratives, is present in the Arthurian mythos by the time the Auchinleck is compiled. Robert de Boron had long ago added the concept of the Holy Grail to Chretien de Troys' unfinished *Perceval*, or *Le Conte del Graal*. Before Arthur and his knights pursued the Cup of Christ, it did not get much publicity.[299]

While King Arthur brings up concepts of religiosity and even the idea of a messiah, comic book superheroes take the treatment of religion one step further. According to their times, they take up the questions of the public that creates them in regards to the mysteries of the divine. The big question now, at least theologically, is how do otherwise normal people deal with superpowers? It is a question aimed at finding the human beneath the superhuman, much as recent Arthurian scholarship has been focused on the task of finding the real man or men behind the stories of King Arthur.

And so recent films and comics have had a fascination with these godlike creatures called superheroes. Many of them are engaged in a quest for origin, for meaning, for humanity in

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[299] Richard O'Gorman. "Grail." The New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

characters who have, for lack of a better term, become secular messiahs, particularly Superman. A sequence planned for "Superman Returns" which was cut for budget reasons would have shown Superman's spacecraft navigating the shattered remains of Krypton, with cities still hauntingly intact on the surface of the fractured and broken planet. Director Bryan Singer has said that he would like to perhaps shoe-horn in that scene into the sequel.

Then there is the phenomenon of the "Smallville" television show, which, despite its promise of no tights, no capes, no flights, is a hit in the ratings. The public wants to see the childhood, the teen years, the awkward years of Superman. Like this project quests to do, there is a constant yearning for a connection between the present and the past. Arthur – fictional or real – is a part of England's past, and the stories that came down through the centuries were attempts at filling in the blanks as a way to know the unknowable past, just as the apocryphal gospels and the infancy gospels of Jesus attempt to fill in the ideological, historical, and biographical blanks in the Text of Jesus of Nazareth.

In fact, the series Superman For All Seasons echoes just such apocrypha. It is organized into four issues, each representing a season. Spring, the first issue, is narrated by Jonathan "Pa" Kent. He recalls spectacular deeds that Clark did while growing up in Smallville, such as moving giant boulders from the farm fields and rescuing a man from a gas station about to explode during a tornado. The issue ends with Clark revealing his powers to Lana Lang – his high school crush – before going off to become Superman in Metropolis. This roughly parallels the Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter, which details events up to his death, as in early versions of Superman's formative years, Jonathan Kent dies just before Clark leaves for Metropolis to

become Superman.[300] The second issue – summer – is written from the point of view of Lois Lane, the woman in love with a god. Her story would seem to echo the popular gospel of Mary Magdalene, but in fact it does not. She merely bears witness to some of Superman's feats of strength. The real forbidden-love narrative comes in the fourth issue, narrated by Lana Lang, the boyhood crush Clark Kent left to become Superman in Metropolis. She knows that she cannot love him, cannot have him, because he belongs to the world. She knows his secret, which even Lois does not know. Her secret knowledge is similar to that given to Mary Magdalene by Jesus in the apocryphal gospel.

The third story is told by Superman's greatest enemy: Lex Luthor. In it he gives his reasons for doing what he does and hating Superman as much as he does. One would expect this to echo the Gospel of Judas, but it does not. Instead of making Luther a sympathetic character, as the Gospel of Judas does for its title character, it only serves to make him more dislikable, more loathsome.

But the entire book goes to a project of discovering who is behind the S – Clark Kent or Kal El? It is engaged in finding out who the Man of Steel was, is, and will be. In fact, it was a similar desire to discover the past of these superheroes—these pseudo-religious figures—that impelled this project from the start – a search for a historical continuity, for a mechanism of historical transmission. The later redactions of King Arthur, when he is fully equipped with the Round Table and Camelot, implicitly follow Stan Lee's famous axiom as the foundation for the unique Arthurian moral code: "People ask me where I came up with the line, "With great power

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[300] Al Plastino (a). "The Last Days of Ma and Pa Kent." Superman Vol. 1 #161 (May 1963), DC Comics.

must also come great responsibility," and I have no idea!"[301] It came implicitly and subconsciously from Arthur, an extension of the link forged around the idea of an Outsider Boy King, a composite role with which both the character of Arthur and Spider-Man identify. This sense of being an Outsider informs much of post-modern thought on religion. The hit Broadway musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* is the final movement of the character of Jesus of Nazareth from real person to revered spiritual leader to worshiped dogma to aloof precept, and finally, to a reinterpretation, with the implicit question: how can any man deal with going to sleep at night being called the Messiah? This desire for the human in the midst of the superhuman is expressed in the lyrics of a song from *Superstar*, a song sung by the character of Mary Magdalene:

> I don't know how to love him.
> What to do, how to move him.
> I've been changed, yes really changed.
> In these past few days, when I've seen myself,
> I seem like someone else.
> I don't know how to take this.
> I don't see why he moves me.
> He's a man. He's just a man.
> And I've had so many men before,
> In very many ways,
> He's just one more.
> Should I bring him down?
> Should I scream and shout?
> Should I speak of love,
> Let my feelings out?
> I never thought I'd come to this.
> What's it all about?
> Don't you think it's rather funny,
> I should be in this position.
> I'm the one who's always been
> So calm, so cool, no lover's fool,
> Running every show.
> He scares me so.

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[301] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 41:57.

I never thought I'd come to this.
What's it all about?
Yet, if he said he loved me,
I'd be lost. I'd be frightened.
I couldn't cope, just couldn't cope.
I'd turn my head. I'd back away.
I wouldn't want to know.
He scares me so.
I want him so.
I love him so.

The words of the song might as well be sung by Sharon Carter, the paramour of Steve Rogers/Captain America, or by Lois Lane-Kent, Superman's wife. They too must negotiate a love for a man who has become a symbol, something far more than flesh and blood.

The exact same process has occurred with superheroes; perhaps they are not real people, but they start as normal people (within the confines of their own universe) and then become an ideal, an icon, as Superman and Captain America have. Then, as time goes on, the ideal becomes aged and dated, and crumbles, as it did with DC Comics' Crisis storyline. But then the story gets reinterpreted, be it by an actor or a director or a new writer or artist, and then the story has new life.

In the 2009 Marvel one-shot entitled Iron Man: Requiem, writers David Michelinie and Matt Fraction explicitly explore this idea of multiple—and sometimes contradictory—takes on a character, in this case, Iron Man/Tony Stark. In the very first pages, Stark says, "I mean—I'm here and I'm in Afghanistan and I know this is where the Iron Man started because—because this is where it is and this is where I am. But when I think about it … I'm not actually sure that I'm in Afghanistan. Am I sure? Am I certain? I mean … I'm remembering all of this differently. There's the logic of the situation—time, place, physical proof … but my memories … they're

swearing all of this happened somewhere else…" In recent years, Stark's original origin, which took place in a cave during the Vietnam War, had been shifted to the Middle East so as to update the character for a modern world.[302]

Arthur too has been continually re-imagined, and that is why we have so many different variations on the original story. The same is the case with the entire canon – both literary and biblical. And it is also the same with comic books. Our superheroes have become our secular messiahs, and the producers and creators of comic book superheroes have become conscious of this ascendance, and used it as a refrain within superheroic text. In "Superman Returns," Superman takes Lois up for her first flight in the five years that he has been away from Earth. In that time, she ostensibly wrote a Pulitzer-Prize-winning piece called "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman." He takes her high up above the city of Metropolis, and asks her, "Listen. What do you hear?" Lois responds, "Nothing." Superman looks down with sad eyes at his adopted home and says distantly, "I hear everything. You wrote that the world doesn't need a savior, but everyday I hear people crying for one."

"There's definitely an allegory, a Judeo-Christian allegory that's happening in the mythology of Superman, right up to the point that he descends from the heavens," director Bryan Singer said.[303]

"They took an Old Testament story, which is Moses, whose mother and father were about to be killed by the Egyptians, in this case it was Krypton, and just like Moses went down the

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[302] Stan Lee (w), David Michelinie (w), Matt Fraction (w), Larry Lieber (p), Joe Brozowski (p), John Romita Jr. (p), Kano (p), Tom Chu (c). Iron Man: Requiem #1 of 1 (Dec., 2009), Marvel Comics.

[303] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 46:50.

Nile, (Superman) landed on Earth as an immigrant and was adopted,"[304] opined Gene Simmons, the erstwhile "Demon" of the rock band KISS, and an immigrant himself (his given Israeli name is Chaim Witz). Messianic overtures such as these are not unique to superheroes. It is yet another example of the inheritance bequeathed from King Arthur.

Not far removed historically from the supposed time of a historical Arthur's reign, the Roman Empire, already in its death throes, the belief in a possible savior, and a spiritual one at that, had become very popular. As Rome expanded to Britannia, it brought it's mystique of *Romanitas* (civilization), and this idea of a so-called *Restitutor Orbis*, or World Restorer.[305]

It is not difficult therefore, nor is it too far a leap textually, to say that the text of Arthur, the body of works, upholds a conception of Arthur as just such a world restorer. Arthur is referred, in the Auchinleck tale, to having the "sengreal"[306]– the blood royal, a term also associated with Jesus of Nazareth, who was of the blood royal of Israel, specifically of King David, who appears in the Auchinleck in close proximity to the Arthur story.

The concept of the so-called *Restitutor Orbis*, or the more-familiar Judeo-Christian Messiah, brings the purpose of the David work within the Auchinleck into stark focus. David is claimed in the New Testament to be the progenitor of the bloodline that would produce the Messiah.[307] Furthermore, Psalm 51, which the David work paraphrases, is written at the point in the biblical David narrative immediately after the king has committed adultery with Bathsheba. The timing of that composition within the biblical chronology is key to David's connection with

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[304] Ibid 46:59

[305] Much of the material regarding the idea of a Restitutor Orbis is taken from the chapter "The Unextinguished Light" in Geoffrey Ashe's The Discovery of King Arthur

[306] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 2750

[307] Described in detail in Matthew 1:1-17

Arthur because of the exclusion of any hint of adultery from the Auchinleck Arthur story at a point in the development of Arthurian myth where there do indeed exist several such widely-known stories about both Arthur[308] and of course Guinevere. The placement of the psalm in such close proximity to Arthur not only suggests a continuity of the Davidic line, but also a means of redeeming Arthur and Guinevere as a viable couple. Instead of their relationship being characterized by deceit and tragedy, Arthur is evermore the knight in shining armor to Guinevere's damsel in distress. She swoons as a teenaged Arthur rides into battle:

> G[v]eneoure sat on þe cite walle
> & þe oþer leuedis alle,
> Of Arthour seiŠe justing þis,
> On him þai laiden al þe priis.[309]

It serves to stand in for the well-known adultery storylines and in a way, apologize for them and to retroactively patch up the relationship between Arthur and Guinevere.

For Arthur to in a sense fulfill his relationship with the messianic aspects of the Davidic line, he must first be de-paganized and turned into a Christian religious figure. Owing much of the supernatural elements of his story to Welsh traditions, and even his most-trusted council to a dark-skinned wizard borne of the union of a nun and a demon[310], Arthur must also be redeemed, in a sense, by translating his enemies from rebellious Scottish and Irish chieftains to evil pagans – and not just any pagans, but Saracens.

Though the Danes, Scots, and Irish are light-skinned and European, the work still types them as Muslim Saracens, using the same language as another Auchinleck text, the *King of Tars*

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[308] Dixon-Kennedy, 32

[309] Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6375-6378

[310] Ibid, ll. 675-686

("The paiem fel ded to grounde, / His soule lauȝt helle-hounde"[311]). This crusading narrative does not start with Arthur himself, but with his father, who, to fight for King Angys, must battle Saracens "of Danmark."[312] This gives a familial history of fealty to Christianity, and creates a lineage of fighting for the faith that is also present with Jesus, who's ancestor was Israel's great warrior king who expanded the Judean kingdom to its greatest extent.

To even further type Arthur as a messianic hero, the Auchinleck's king thanks God or Jesus for each of his great victories in battle ("& tho he thonked the king of glorie / that him hadde ȝouen the victory / To ouercomen his fomen,"[313]). Additionally, Arthur is seen as the chief molester of the Saracens, doing them "grete schame & grete pines."[314] His knights, especially Gawain, are said to have been given, by Christ himself no less, "both might & main."[315] Furthermore, the ability of Gawain to double his strength at midday is not seen as a type of pagan sorcery, but rather that his "strengthe is dubled bi God aboue"[316]. By creating a type of crusading discourse, with the heretofore pagan Excalibur shining as a figuration of the cross used in the service of God by slaying Saracens ("With Esclabor his swerd so gode, / That day he schad so michel blode"[317]), Arthur is firmly placed within the realm of a potential Christian messiah, and as a result of the connection in the Auchinleck to the David text, of the very same Davidic royal line (the blood royal) as Jesus.

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[311] Ibid., ll. 6374

[312] Ibid., ll. 2067

[313] Ibid., ll.3368-3372

[314] Ibid., 4412

[315] Ibid., 4632

[316] Ibid., 5221

[317] Ibid., 6257-8

Speaking of the Nazarene, the comic book character most often connected with him would be the vaguely Hebraic Kal El of Krypton. The suffix, "-el" means God in Hebrew, and put together, the Hebrew phrase אל-קל can mean "voice of God" which fits nicely within the conceit of Superman as a messianic figure.

Superman, though raised by a Protestant Midwestern farm family, was sired by two Jewish creators – Siegel and Schuster. His story is often typed as a Moses story, with the baby from the doomed planet of Krypton floating across the river of space until he reaches the shore of a great empire. Both serve as agents of deliverance, after a fashion. The only difference is that instead of a reed basket on the Nile, Superman sails the stars in a spacecraft.

Both Superman and Jesus go by sobriquets that have come to be commonly associated with them, but are not in fact their given names. Jesus is a Latinization of the Hebrew name Joshua, and Christ is a name owing to the Greek "*Khristós*," or, "anointed one." Likewise, Superman is Kal El's "Christ" – it comes from how he is perceived, not who he is.

The Green Lantern Hal Jordan tries to undo the destruction of his home city during the Death of Superman saga, but his rage and vision of righteousness warped by tragedy cause him to destroy the entire Green Lantern Corps and become the fallen Parallax. He tries to be a savior, but the savior role lies not in the obliteration of past wrongs by any means necessary, but rather lifting up a fallen world. When Jordan realizes his error, he sacrifices himself to defeat the villain Sun-Eater, re-igniting the sun and saving Earth.[318]

In Captain America Vol. 4, #25, as Steve Rogers is being led to a New York County courthouse, the narrative boxes on the comic book pages read like a eulogy. The newscaster

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[318] Daniel Wallace. "Parallax." DC Comics Encyclopedia. 2004.

intimates that Steve Rogers fought not for any particular America, but for the ideal of America, for the America that we believe in beyond political parties and policy decisions. He fought for a better world. The pages read:

> Everyone knows the story of Steve Rogers, the skinny kid who grew up on the streets of New York City during the Depression, seeing the best and worst that America had to offer. How he saw the Nazis marching on Europe, and tried to join the armed services. How a general saw the courage under his 4-F frame, and enlisted him in another kind of service altogether. He was supposed to be the first of an army, an army of Super Soldiers, but it all went wrong. Project: Rebirth ended in blood and fire, and left one man to carry on in the place of all the others that might have been. One man to carry that burden. He made it look easy. Even though it never was. And he never stopped fighting for what he believed in. Or for what he believed his country should be.

But, as I have stated earlier, we do not just accept Arthur and superheroes wholesale as messianic figures. They have to have a human side, a sympathetic and vulnerable side. For Captain America, it's his sometimes childish idealism (something we all wish we still had, at times). For Superman it is his connection to the human race via his parents and his wife, Lois Lane-Kent. And it is in this humanization that our characters become less religious and more secular. They become like Arthur – a hero of a wider world than that restrained to the land of his creation.

In our heroes, we seek to find the human element that is the source of their greatest powers. Superman goes up against Doomsday and dies, but is resurrected, and subsequently defeats Doomsday with intelligence and with his humanity.[319] It is Superman's humanity that is his greatest asset, not his great power. C.J. Mackie, in the essay, Men of Darkness, which compares and contrasts an Achilles/Odysseus dialectic with Superman/Batman, asserts that both

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[319] Dan Jurgens (w, a) and Norm Rapmund(i). "Death." Superman: The Doomsday Wars #3 of 3 (1999), DC Comics.

of the earlier heroes in each of the dialectics, Achilles and Superman, are representative of a "pattern (that) seems to exist in which (super)heroism moves from the transcendental to the human, from the almost invulnerable, otherworldly kind of figure, to the very human man of darkness and courage."[320] However well that assertion may work on the micro level, of earlier-to-later within a certain milieu, it also works on the larger time scale, one which Mackie does not discuss. While Superman may be invulnerable, per se, he does have weaknesses.

In the All-Star Superman series, Superman flies through the sun to save a research vessel trapped inside. Since the sun is the source of Superman's powers within our solar system (his Kryptonian physiology absorbs solar radiation like Earth-bound plants), his trip through it essentially overloads his cells, and they begin to die. The rest of the series is concerned with how a dying Superman spends his final time on earth. It makes him very mortal. While he is very literally otherworldly, as Byrne's thought bubbles at the end of Man of Steel #4 say, it is the Earth, and America that make Superman who he is. His powers may come from beyond our world, but it is his humanity and his sense of justice that make him a hero beyond the ancient heroes of old who were descended from the gods themselves.

The heroes that Captain America led into the fires of Marvel's Civil War saw that same quality in Steve Rogers. It was his dedication and patriotism that shone through his scrawny exterior that allowed him to become Project Rebirth's only participant, and that love of the idyllic America, of real justice, of real freedom, of the abstract concepts upon which our nation is purported to stand, that earned him the respect of characters on both sides of the conflict. Steve Rogers was not respected by his fellow characters and by fans just because he wore the flag. He

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[320] C.J. Mackie. "Men of Darkness." Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman. Ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, Chris Mackie. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007. pp. 84.

earned it because he wore it well. He wore it like it should be worn – with pride, dignity, humility, and compassion. Not just anyone can "wear the flag."

In Civil War #6, when Frank Castle, the vigilante anti-hero known as the Punisher, kills two super villains who wish to join the ranks of heroes who are rebelling against the Superhuman Registration Act, Captain America assaults him and asks why he doesn't fight back. As he is being pummeled, the Punisher responds that he will not fight back, because he will not fight Captain America, he won't fight Steve Rogers. "Fight, you coward!" Rogers yells with his fist raised above a prone Punisher, who replies groggily, "Not against you." He can't bring himself to do it. As deranged and as brutal as Frank Castle's methods might be, and as different as his ideas of justice are from the rest of the superhero community, he still recognizes the ideals that Steve Rogers represents every time he puts on the flag. A young hero, the Patriot (the grandson of an African-American test subject for Project: Rebirth) says, "I wonder why he wouldn't hit Cap," to which Spider-Man responds, "Are you kidding me? Cap's probably the reason he went to Vietnam."[321]

The very idea of Rogers – of Captain America – impels Tony Stark to pull his punches when facing Rogers' old sidekick, James "Bucky" Barnes, aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. Barnes is a threat to Stark because he holds Stark responsible for Rogers' death, and yet, because of the years when Stark and Rogers were the best of friends, and out of respect for that friendship and Rogers' noble carriage even in defeat, Stark cannot bring himself to hurt Bucky, because in Rogers' last will and testament, he told Stark to "save Bucky."[322] Stark implores Barnes: "Don't

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[321] Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #6, (Jan. 2007), Marvel Comics.

[322] Ed Brubaker (w) and Steve Epting (a). "The Burden of Dreams: Part 3." Captain America Vol. 4 #33 (Dec. 2007), Marvel Comics.

do this," to which an enraged Barnes replies, "Why don't you shove it." Later in the fight, Stark says, "You're good, Bucky, and quick on your feet in a fight. I'm glad to see that. But if you even flinch, I'm going to liquefy your brain right in your head. And I really don't want to do that." Bucky asks, "Why the hell not?" Stark replies, "Because I'm trying to honor the last wishes of a friend. That's why I brought you here, because Steve Rogers asked me to save you … from yourself." He goes on to say, after informing Barnes of Rogers will, that "Steve would never forgive us if we killed each other, would he?"[323]

Just the same, Arthur was just a man, with no inherent superpowers. He was a boy, who gained no respect automatically, as a grown man may have. He earned it through battle and through fair dealings. He was honorable and just. He was a good man. That is what we seem to look for in our superheroes – that they be good people, but people above all; flawed people, sympathetic people, struggling people, but people who can rise up – even from the clutches of death itself – and save us.

Chapter 7:
"Are you the man who can lead us once again?"[324]

"HIC IACET ARTORIVS REX QVONDAM REXQVE FVTVRVS"
(Here Lies Arthur, the Once and Future King)
--Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*

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[323] The full text of Rogers letter from *The Death of Captain America*, Vol. 1: "Tony – If you're reading this, and the worst is to happen, I'm trusting you to do two things: Don't let Bucky drift back into anger and confusion. He has a chance at a new life – help him find his way. Save him for me. And as for Captain America, the part of it that is bigger than me – that's always been bigger than me – don't let it die, Tony. America needs a Captain, maybe now more than ever. Don't let that dream die. Yours, Steve Rogers."

324Lyrics from the Styx song, *Captain America*

The Celtic oral lore about the once and future king is in fact carried out historically by several men whose names can be read as some formation of the name Arthur in Britain and literarily by the great kings of ages and empires long past. In the Auchinleck, it can be seen as the coherence of kingship narratives around the central Arthur tale, and the fact that all three kings share a number of roles that link their textual presences together. This can be viewed, retrospectively, as a single Arthur coming back over and over again to aid the people of the world in their time of need. He is the once and future king precisely because he crops up as so many different people. He is never that one single soldier, sitting atop Badon Hill on his white steed, carrying the pennant of the royal Pendragon. He is not a single man, but a single heroic spirit who comes back over and over again, as different men each and every time. And in our time, he has been reshaped, remade, in the forms of our superheroes.

In the comic book *Heroes for Hire*, No. 2, the character Dane Whitman is brought to the Isle of Avalon by the Lady of the Lake, who shows him the tomb of King Arthur, explaining that the prophesied return was never meant to be an actual resurrection. Instead, a new champion would be chosen to take Arthur's place as "the Pendragon."

The Lady says to Whitman: "Legend tells that Arthur was brought here to be healed of his wounds, to return when needed. For some wounds, however, the best and only healing is death. Behold the TOMB of King Arthur, Lord of the Britons—Arthur PENDRAGON."

Whitman responds: "But, how can Arthur be DEAD if he is to come again?!" The Lady answers that "those who told you the tale mistold a part of it. T'was never said that ARTHUR

would return but that the PENDRAGON would arise anew at need. Each age has its OWN Pendragon … The mortal lands need a new Pendragon, one to champion and inspire them."[325]

However, just like their literary ancestor, even our mightiest heroes—those who fulfill that role of our modern Pendragon(s)—sometimes prove all too mortal.

Arthur falls at the Battle of Camlann, as he simultaneously strikes a fatal blow with Excalibur to his mortal enemy/shadow self/illegitimate son/usurper Mordred. As he lay dying, in a tradition that starts in the 14th century with the English Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, Arthur exhorts his trusted friend and knight Bedivere to cast the great blade Excalibur into the waters from whence it came.[326] Echoing St. Peter's three denials of Christ, three times he goes to the lake, but cannot bear to discard the sword. Finally, after being rebuked by Arthur, Bedivere finally casts Excalibur into the water, leaving it there safe for when it shall be needed again.[327] For a great king who came into existence because of the records of the great battles he fought, there could be no more fitting an end than one wrought in the heat of the fight.

Comic book superheroes see many similar ends. Their continuation of the good fight, of Superman's "never-ending battle" is a direct mirror of Arthur's combative exploits, and their deaths in the midst of those conflicts very much mirror Arthur's. Just as Arthur perishes eliminating his greatest threat – a threat to his life, to his kingdom, his legacy, and his legitimacy – so do comic book superheroes die fighting Earth's greatest threats.

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[325] Jeff Christianson. "Recent King Arthur Conflicts." Marvel Universe App. 10 June 2010 <http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix2/arthurpendragon.htm>.

[326] Raymond H. Thompson. "Bedivere." New Arthurian Encyclopedia, 1991.

[327] Norris J. Lacy. "Excalibur." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

In Crisis on Infinite Earths # 8, Barry Allen—the police officer who became the second Flash—runs himself to death destroying the Anti-Monitor's main weapon aimed at destroying the DC Universe. Allen was later succeeded as the Scarlet Speedster by the former Kid Flash, the impetuous yet lovable Wally West, who took up the mantle and his predecessor's place as a member of the Justice League of America. While the Arthurian canon gestures at a return of the king, the return of the Flash was that promise manifest, though the Flash's death and return are not as important to the relationship of superheroes to King Arthur as that of other heroes, such as Superman and Captain America. Nevertheless, it is important to show that because of Arthur's influence and his place within an arguably global consciousness, that the deaths of superheroes, however minor or major, do indeed mirror the death and promised resurrection of Arthur. It is not just characters like Captain America and Superman that participate in the legacy of Arthur; it is the entire universe of superheroes, and no instance shows that more clearly than the finale to the X-Men's Onslaught saga, which saw a being of near-omnipotent power threaten the planet.

In Onslaught: Marvel Universe (1996), a one-shot in which all of the various strands of the major crossover event were laced together, various heroes, including Captain America, the Fantastic Four, Thor, the Incredible Hulk, Namor, and other superpowered beings sacrificed themselves to defeat the psionic manifestation of pure evil known as Onslaught. Though later it would be revealed that the heroes had not died, but rather fallen into a protective pocket dimension created by the child of Reed (Mr. Fantastic) and Sue (the Invisible Woman) Richards of the Fantastic Four, the near-omnipotent Franklin, at the time it seemed as if all of the world's great heroes had died in order to prevent Onslaught from destroying the planet they had sworn to protect.

But the argument here is not about the general similarities between superheroes as a group and King Arthur. Those similarities are supportive of the overall argument, indeed, but there are no more telling deaths than those of the main actors in this piece: Superman and Captain America, two heroes whose deaths in the comics garnered national media attention.

As comic book writer and DC historian Mark Waid said in the History Channel feature, *Look, Up in the Sky! The Story of Superman*, "Nothing else happened in the world the day the Death of Superman comic hit the newsstands."[328] When the Last Son of Krypton, in order to defend Metropolis from the rampaging Kryptonian monster known as Doomsday, struck one mighty punch to seemingly defeat the hulking behemoth, he too expired, in a near-perfect echo of Arthur's final moments. The entire story arc and its promotion were based on a lie, which the entire comic-reading world, and even the general public bought, hook, line, and sinker.

Many echoed the sentiments of Chuck Rozanski, a comic book industry leader and founder of Mile High Comics in Denver, one of the largest retail comic book dealers in the United States. In a phone call to then-DC President Paul Levitz, Rozanski argued that "since Superman was such a recognized icon within America's overall popular culture … DC had no more right to "kill" him than Disney had the right to "kill" Mickey Mouse … in my opinion, DC didn't actually "own" Superman, but rather was a trustee of a sacred national image."[329]

Superman perished defeating, arguably, a creature of his own blood, as Doomsday was later revealed to be an experiment performed by early Kryptonian scientists at a time when the planet Krypton was the most hostile planet in the universe. He was a living weapon, designed to

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[328] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 1:17:18.

[329] Chuck Rozanski. ""Death of Superman" Promotion of 1992." Mile High Comics. Mile High Comics. 10 April 2008 <http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg127.html>.

withstand the harsh and horrifying creatures of primordial Krypton's wilderness. The key here is that like Arthur and Mordred, Superman and Doomsday shared a history, blood, and even DNA. While Superman gained his powers because of Earth's yellow sun (the source of life), just as Arthur gained his throne by assaying the sword from the stone, Doomsday gained his strength literally from death. A shorthand explanation of the evolution of Doomsday is that Kryptonian infants were repeatedly exposed to the harsh Kryptonian environs in order to create the perfect warrior.[330]

Superman couldn't be dead. No one could take his place, though DC did introduce four replacement "Supermen," each claiming some legitimacy as Superman's successor or even to be Superman himself. Though the truth eventually came out, and the true Superman did make a triumphant return in order to defeat the usurper Cyborg Superman with the aid of the three other Supermen, the storyline struck a nerve in the consciousness of all who treasured the Big Blue Boy Scout around the world.

In All-Star Superman, the idea of the death of the Man of Steel was raised yet again, this time framing the story with Superman's knowledge that he would eventually die, and as tasked with accomplishing 12 Herculean labors before he shuffled off of his slightly-more-than-mortal coil. One of those tasks is to create life. Not being able to mate with Lois Lane because of his alien biology, he finds a small pocket Universe, just beginning to sprout, and nurtures it in the Fortress of Solitude. Superman wants to be secure in the knowledge that when he is gone, the world will be able to function without him, and that people will have learned from his example. Throughout the end of All-Star Superman #10, we see glimpses of this Universe evolving.

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[330] Robert Greenberger. "Doomsday." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

Interspersed with frames that have to do with the plot, we see the first cave paintings of Aboriginal peoples. Then we see a man working on the carving of an Indo-European goddess amongst a forest of temples. Next we see Sophocles debating the role of the philosopher king:

> "Let us not yield sovereignty even to them, the highest of the angelic hierarchies! Become instead like them in all their glory and dignity. Imitation is man's nature and if he but wills it, so shall he surpass even imagination's greatest paragons."

The next scene we see of this so-called Earth Q is a mustachioed man hunched over in work, writing the words, "Behold, I teach you the Superman." It is Nietzsche, writing his tract on the Ubermensch. The final page shows a building in Cleveland, with a speech bubble coming anonymously out of one of the windows:

> "I really think this is it … Third time lucky. This is the one … This is going to change everything."

And with the last lines, the frame shows a fingered pencil, just finishing the pencil outline of a man in a cape, with a big S shield stretched across his chest. The point being that in a world without Superman, we have to create one. We need that star to shoot for. We need that hero, that Superman or that King Arthur. We need something to believe in.[331]

Just as he is dealing with his own mortality, so do we deal with our own, and our hope in the resurrection and return of our heroes is a manifestation of that. If we can't live forever, than maybe our heroes can, or at least, find a way past death. We are now dealing with a world without a Superman. We look around everyday and see war, famine, terrorism, death, disease, and we can do nothing. We need a Superman to save us, but what the image of Superman, of King Arthur, really, does is to give us the star to shoot for, so that maybe, as Superman wishes in the final pages of All-Star Superman #10, we can save ourselves, learn to be our own Superman.

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[331] http://dcboards.warnerbros.com/web/thread.jspa?threadID=2000148245&tstart=0&start=30

This concept of becoming our superheroes lives in the array of apparel produced with the Kryptonian S stretched across it – sweatshirts, t-shirts, belt buckles, and more – and in the attitudes of everyday heroes, like the relief worker cleaning up an oil spill on the shores of Spain who drew a crude Superman S on his chest with the very substance he was working to clean.[332] Our superheroes provide for us not a template for action, for their abilities, like the magical abilities of Excalibur, are not real. What they provide for us is that same moral code and ethical guide that King Arthur bequeathed to them.

The one character whose death looks like it has staying power is Captain America. The big blow of Steve Rogers' death is that he was the conscience of the Marvel Universe. He didn't just wear the flag. He wore it well. For him, the moment that Franklin Roosevelt gave him his round shield is equivalent to the moment that Arthur pulled the sword from the stone to become the one true king. Rather than dying in a battle of succession, as Arthur did, Cap dies protecting his jailors. He was imprisoned because he gave up fighting for fear he would injure innocents. He gave up his protest because he realized it wasn't what the people wanted. He could not force them to see things his way, nor did he want to. Even in defeat, he was noble. He has fought for ideals, not policy.

So, when Iron Man asks Clint Barton to take over the mantle, and Hawkeye takes the shield for a spin, it is no wonder that even though the archer and Cap bumped heads many times, Barton still respects what Rogers stood for. He was like Arthur's Lancelot at times, much like Stark. In fact, when he is trying out the shield, he tells Stark that "it's like diddling with your best friend's wife." When he gives up the shield, and the costume, because he realizes that he

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[332] http://www.supermanhomepage.com/images/news-images/spanish-oil-tb.html

isn't the right man for the job, he refutes that role of Lancelot. Whether this shows a conscious connection to an Arthur-Lancelot formation, who's to say? But, whether conscious or unconscious, it is still there.

So far, Captain America the only one of the three classic longstanding characters who have died that has not and, if you believe writer Ed Brubaker, will not ever come back, at least with Steve Rogers behind the mask. Bucky Barnes has since returned to carry the shield, and carry on the legacy, but he does it consciously knowing that he can never *be* Steve, and that his methods are different because he does not possess the idealism that Rogers did.

Sharon Cameron's article[333] on Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Experience," deals with a theory of loss suggestive of the way that comic books deal with the loss of superheroes. In particular, it echoes the song by the Canadian group, the Crash Test Dummies, called "Superman's Song."

Emerson mentions the death of his son only in the first few pages of his essay, while the song obliquely references the hypothetical death of Superman only in its first verse: "Clark Kent, now there was a real gent."

The song is implicitly about the death of Superman (interestingly enough, two years before it occurred in the comics), and indeed the music video for the song is set at a funeral with aging superheroes in attendance. It is a eulogy and seems to acknowledge itself as such in the opening lines, however throughout the rest of the song, there is no mention of the death of the Man of Steel, save for the use of the past tense in the chorus: "Superman never made any

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[333] Sharon Cameron. "Representing Grief: Emerson's "Experience."" *Representations*, No. 15 (Summer, 1986), pp. 15-41.

money / saving the world from Solomon Grundy / And sometimes I despair the world will never see a man like him."

Similarly, though inspired by the death of Emerson's son Waldo, the essay mentions the occurrence only once. It is a lament, but the object of lament is nigh ungraspable, in the same way as the death of Superman, for the Crash Test Dummies, cannot be said outright, but must be approached from different angles until we finally get the picture that Superman has in fact died and that the song is a eulogy for him.

We don't realize how death affects us until it occurs, and then, we cannot really put it into words save for the negative sensations – the feeling of what is not there, as Emerson does. Emerson says that "this calamity … does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar." This fits perfectly with the tendency of some of the greatest heroes (Captain America, Superman) to die (and then for the comic's sake, be resurrected), leaving tremendous emptiness and confusion in the hearts and minds of the world they protected. It is not the pain of loss, but rather the emptiness that is most prominent. But that emptiness serves a purpose, at least for comic book and Arthur readers, for we know that sooner or later, a new hero will rise. Death is only a momentary inconvenience. It is a new chance at life. But when that hole, that emptiness is not immediately filled, or inadequately filled, only then do readers of heroic literature experience what Emerson did – a feeling of missing, of incomplete being.

And, no matter how many times we try, like Emerson, to quantify that or to put the loss and grief into words, we run into the same problems that he did – the inability to express that

feeling of loss. We refer back to the hero's career and accomplishments, and only in retrospect do we see the effect they had on their worlds both on the page and off of it.

Similarly, for King Arthur to become the hero, Malory's "once and future king," he had to die. The world could not do with an immortal savior.

Death is an important part of the experience of life, and though it can never be felt in the realm of positive sensations, "I feel this way or that way," it is felt in the negative or emptiness left by the hero, the “world without.”

So what can readers of heroic literature learn from Emerson’s Experience? We don’t know what we have until it is gone. The only thing we can try to do is to move on.

It is the resurrection of the Arthurian in the modern comic book, not just the resurrection of the heroes themselves that is paramount here – that is the connection – it’s not the heroes or even Arthur coming back, but it is the idea, the concept, the practices, and the ephemera that are resurrected – the pre-modern is alive and well in the post-modern age

It is not, as I have stated, just the resurrection of the heroic or the hero himself, but the resurrection of the way the heroic stories are told, even down to the very modes of production

It must be said that it is not Arthur himself who is being resurrected by these heroes and their stories, but rather the spirit of Arthur and the spirit of the whole of the Arthurian text that is being resurrected

We are remembering what our heroes meant to us and how we told their stories. The parallels and resemblances exist, “be they conscious or unconscious” responses to antiquity.”[334]

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[334] Mackie, 83.

We resurrect the way we spoke of our heroes of old because perhaps we need them now more than ever – we need that epic scale and that knight in shining armor and that moral certainty that Arthur brought.

At the turn of the last century, there came a huge upwelling of Arthuriana. The most significant return "of Arthur has not been in particular accounts of his second coming, but in the revitalization of the entire body of Arthurian material after its relative dormancy between the Middle Ages and the 19th century." At the end of the 19th century, the very first seeds of the superheroic were being sewn. Hawthorne had just written his Gray Champion. Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel were putting on their masks. And then, out of the blue, came a King. Except the royal Pendragon had coiled itself into an S. [335]

Why is this? Why did Arthur suddenly reappeared in popular culture? Because his descendants, those wondrous caped superheroes, have captured more than just box office receipts. They have experienced a renaissance of the heroic, urging us implicitly to look back to where it all began, where our superheroes have their true "secret origin."

Chapter 8:
Everybody's Waiting for Superman[336]

"I can't stand to fly
I'm not that naïve
I'm just out to find
The better part of me."
--Five for Fighting, *Superman (It's Not Easy)*

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[335] Stephen R. Reimer and Raymond H. Thompson. "Legend of Arthur's Return." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

336 Lyrics from "Waiting for Superman," The Flaming Lips.

"I am (I am), I am Superman
And I can do anything."
--The Academy Is, *Superman*

"Ooh Superman where are you now
When everything's gone wrong somehow."
--Genesis, *Land of Confusion*

Why do we keep bringing heroes back? Why do superheroes come back from the dead? Why did those storytellers of old place Arthur on the raft to heal his wounds on Avalon?

Witness one Christopher Reeve, a man who pulled on the spandex and red underwear of Superman in four feature films. As the snake biting the unnamed knight on horseback touched off King Arthur's final battle at Camlann, so did Reeve meet his own misfortune on horseback. In May of 1995, Reeve suffered a riding accident during an equestrian event, becoming paralyzed from the neck down when he was thrown from his mount.[337]

Reeve played Superman over four films, and came to represent the character for an entire generation. Once he had his accident, he became a tireless promoter for spinal injury research, including stem cell research. His fundraising doubtless saved many lives, and improved the quality of life for people across the globe. His appearance on Season 2 of the television show *Smallville* was in effect a passing of the torch to the newest Clark Kent, Tom Welling. Despite being bound to a wheelchair after being publicly known as the strongest man on Earth, his mere appearance on the show skyrocketed ratings, and served as a de facto blessing on the enterprise.

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[337] Lois Romano. "Riding Accident Paralyzes Actor Christopher Reeve." *Washington Post*, June 1, 1995. pp. A1. 19 Nov. 2006.

In all, the foundation has raised tens of millions of dollars for spinal cord injury research. "He wasn't here just to be an actor," said Donner. "He was Superman."[338]

The vast collection of editorial cartoons from just after Reeve passed away say more than I ever could about what his death meant for the public. One showed Captain America, Spiderman, and Batman, looking down on the fresh grave of Reeve, with Batman exclaiming, "He really was a Superman…" A cartoon by Bill Schorr of United Media showed Superman, holding a *Daily Planet*, the headline of which reads "Christopher Reeve Dies," and below the Man of Steel, in quotes: "He was my hero…" In the *Charlotte Observer*, Kevin Siers drew a motorized wheelchair in an open phone booth, one of the iconic places where Clark Kent makes his signature transformation into the Last Son of Krypton. The white caption on the black background: "Up, up and away," one of the phrases commonly associated with Superman. In *USA Today*, a silhouetted wheelchair sits empty, as a small caped figure flies away in the distance.

A cartoon by Marshall Ramsey of the Clarion Ledger in Jackson, Miss., showed a black and white tableau, with the empty wheelchair, and a lone colored red and blue figure flying out of the seat, already fading into the distance. But perhaps the most touching of all was one by Glenn McCoy, depicting a cloud bank, with an empty wheelchair in the background. In the foreground was Reeve as Superman, chatting with St. Peter. Reeve's left hand is held up in a dismissing gesture, as he says, "Keep the wings." For millions of fans across the globe, Superman himself had died. But apart from the role, it was Reeve who gave them all hope. Perhaps he was born to put on that red S and show the world that a man really could fly (the

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[338] Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 1:34:12.

tagline to the first Superman film was "You Will Believe a Man Can Fly") even if he couldn't walk.

Stuart Laird, the editor of the first Superman film, said when asked about Reeve:

> "Chris believed. It wasn't just a performance. He believed he was Superman. He lived it and he realized what a wonderful opportunity it was for him. He didn't take it slightly. He didn't have any embarrassment about it. It became more than just a part. Like Sean Connery became James Bond and always will be."[339]

During the years that Reeve spent on spinal research fundraising, it was not a real Superman coming to save the world, but a man in a wheelchair armed with an idea, a notion, a myth, and the face of our greatest hero

In light of this treatment of Reeve's death, let's take one more look at how comic book superheroes played into the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. In the first pages of Captain America Vol. 4 #1[340], a lone figure struggles with the rubble at Ground Zero, lifting whatever he can to rescue whatever survivors there might be. A close-up on the inside of his forearm shows 'Steve Rogers' written in marker as part of the rescue effort. Another rescue worker tells Rogers, "You have to sleep." Rogers responds, "I slept yesterday."

In a 9-11 tribute comic, DC artists depicted Superman – the most powerful hero in the world – standing, with his dog Krypto by his side, staring up in awe at a billboard, which shows firemen, doctors, nurses, and police officers larger than life. With one word, Superman shows that in the face of the real heroes of Sept. 11, he is humbled. The only word in the speech bubble is, "Wow."

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[339] You Will Believe, "The Heart of a Hero: A Tribute to Christopher Reeve." 28:17.

[340] John Ney Rieber (w) and John Cassaday (a). "Loss of Innocence." Captain America Vol. 4 #1 (Jun. 2002), Marvel Comics.

DC wasn't the only company to utilize the single-word frame. In Amazing Spider-Man #36, as New York burns to ashes around him after the towers topple down, Spider-Man is shown perched atop a nearby roof, body twisted and hands grasping his head in anguish. As he gazes at the fiery crucible that had been the World Trade Center, he speaks only one word: "…God…" The cover of that issue was entirely black, save for the white masthead. It was the comic world's black armband.

Another piece of art showed the smoking New York City skyline in haunting pastels, with a shadowy figure of Captain America set against the sky, shield held limp at his side, and right hand covering his face and the tracks of his tears.

In an Alex Ross piece from JLA: Secret Origins (2002), a silhouetted Superman is straining to hold up a falling piece of presumably World Trade Center rubble. We cannot see the famous S shield, but we see the flash of red at the base of his cape, and the Kryptonian forelock on his forehead. We know it's Superman, without even having to see his chest.

But it was not only Sept. 11 that elicited such emotional superhero response. Other disasters carry the mark of superheroes as well, including an oil spill in Spain. One of the cleanup workers was famously photographed in his all-white jumpsuit, with the putrid crude used to draw a symbol on his chest in stark relief – Superman's S shield. Superheroes express the feelings of a society, and sometimes of a world. And they also give us strength, it seems, to right grievous wrongs, and sometimes save a little corner of the world.

Reeve played Superman in four major motion pictures. His paralysis shocked the world, and not just those who read comic books. He was a man who was seen as not just an actor playing Superman, but the real Man of Steel. He became as iconic as the S shield on his chest.

After his horse riding accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down, he became a tireless advocate for spinal research, determined that one day, he – and other paraplegics – would walk again. On the official website for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, there is a donation tab labeled: "Be a Superhero," exhorting all who visit to be a Superman of their very own.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

> "They're inside of me, they still live on."
> --Shinedown, *Heroes*

As Lois Lane looks up from her front yard at the hovering god above her, she asks, "I … will we see you … around?" Superman looks down, and smiles. "I'm always around. Goodnight, Lois."

A touching end to the concluding scene of 2006's "Superman Returns." But in light of this project, it takes on much greater significance than just a goodbye. The film was not critically acclaimed, and it was deemed by fans a so-so restart to the movie franchise. But, as is my wont it seems with what are widely held to be sub-par hero movies (i.e. "King Arthur," 2004), I have found a gem in the midst of the mud. Despite its perceived shortcomings as a film, the movie's concluding lines say perhaps all we need to know about our heroes, and on a more personal note, the very reason I was compelled to author this work. It slices open the pages (or celluloid) of the heroic and superheroic texts to offer perhaps a glimpse into why this resurrection of the Arthurian has happened, why the legend of King Arthur – or Lucius Artorius Castus or Ambrosius Aurelianus or whoever he really was – forged in the dying embers of the

Roman Empire, has been resurrected by, for humor's sake, men in tights who wear their underwear on the outside.

The reception of Reeve's death and the reaction of the general public to the events of Sept. 11 show many things about the role of heroes in modern American society. But, the question may be asked: Where is King Arthur in all of this? I return to the same answer that I have given whenever I am asked about this thesis, and the same answer Superman gives to Lois: He's always around. For me, that is the simplest answer to perhaps the most complex question: Why? Arthur and Superman and Hercules and Captain America – they have always been around. We are only just beginning to sit up and take notice, as the publication dates on many of my academic references illuminate. Only in the past 10 or so years have we been looking seriously at comic books as a form of literature at best, and at least as a valid field of academic inquiry. We are only starting to realize that these heroes have indeed, always been around.

The thesis that arose out of my first reading of the Auchinleck two years ago, was not just that Arthur was an amalgamation of David and Alexander, or perhaps, to use an anachronism, an upgrade on the old operating system. It was something far deeper, and far more ephemeral: it was the very idea of a Once and Future King. There seemed written between the lines an idea that this King corrected the sins and the mistakes of the previous two examples of kingship and then came back from his place of slumber – like Hawthorne's Gray Champion – to save a land and a people in need. The Once and Future King was not a man, but a spirit, or more accurately perhaps, an idea. That idea, that Figure of Arthur, condensed the white and indistinct light of the divine, classical, and biblical heroes that came before into a single point, only to shatter it again into the rainbow of costumed heroes that we have today. King Arthur represents for us the very

first notions of the figures that we today call superheroes. The persistence, for so many centuries, of this tale of magic, myth, and fantasy shows that even though we – as individuals – have outgrown ideas like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, we are still willing to believe in a wizard, a magical sword, and a knight in shining armor. Not *believe*, but *believe in*. That tiny preposition makes a huge difference. If we *believed* that superheroes existed, then we would wait for them to solve all of our problems. Something that contemporary artists and writers have shown us in the pages of such graphic novels as "Superman: Peace on Earth," they cannot, and should not do. On the other hand, if we *believe in* our heroes, our superheroes, and if we *believe in* King Arthur, then maybe we can aspire to their heights, and learn from them. Maybe by believing *in* them, in their moral codes, their childlike idealism, their fantastic abilities and their selfless devotion to use those abilities to help others – rather than for personal gain – can help us to see the great things mankind can accomplish. Maybe we can fulfill the words that Marlon Brando, as Superman's father Jor El, spoke in that first Superman film: "They are a great people Kal El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show them the way."

The appeal of the Arthurian can be directly traced to the roles that he fulfills: the roles he inherited from Alexander and David, and those retroactively pressed upon him from the cultures that he has inhabited. He has been a lowly squire, a messianic hero, a warrior, and has overcome impossible odds. He was an illegitimate child – an outsider – and yet became the High King of Britain.

Superman was a child of the stars, bound to this blue marble by horrific, apocalyptic circumstances. An alien, he was raised by salt-of-the-earth farmers, and grew up to become a successful, yet humble, big-city journalist. At the same time, he is both the nerdy kid who

everyone picks on, as well as the most popular kid at school, just as his creators – Siegel and Schuster – originally conceived of him.

These characters, all of them, that glorious rainbow of them, give us one thing above all – hope. A hope that we can be that popular kid, even if we are the outcast, and that we have the power within us to do the right thing. That is why Arthur and his knights have persisted for so long. They are not forced upon us, but in part created by us, and by the centuries of readers, listeners, scribes, and poets that have been touched by – and who have themselves touched – the tale. The idea of a once and future king, especially in light of the concept of a recurring heroic spirit presented by the Auchinleck, is just enough to give us that hope, separate from the dogma and blind faith of religion.

We have invested so much in these heroes that even the men who merely put on the costume come to actually *be* those characters. So it was with Christopher Reeve. He understood what Donner and what every comic book writer already knew – these heroes are a treasure of every boy and girl who has ever spent their weekly allowance on a comic book (I fondly remember being one of them), who has ever dared to dream, who has ever tied the nearest red towel around their neck as they watch Saturday morning cartoons (like even the Demon himself, Gene Simmons of KISS – who's given name is Chaim Witz, an Israeli immigrant to America). Indeed, as David Newman said those many years ago, these heroes are our King Arthur. Superheroes today are for us what Arthur was for audiences and the public centuries ago. Yes, the tales strain science, logic, and belief, but not hope and imagination.

From the earliest time that mankind was able to tell a story, he has looked up to the sky and wondered. That idea of a knight in shining armor, riding a white steed into battle to stand for

"truth, justice, all that stuff,"[341] is present in each and every one of our comic book heroes. As Joe Quesada said, "Comic books have been around since the dawn of time, they just weren't put on paper; they were put on cave walls … Superhero comics are just an extension of that."[342] Excalibur has turned into a star-spangled shield, and the Royal Pendragon has coiled itself into an S. A knight's helm has turned into the cape and cowl. And while these figurations of Arthur may look very different than either the Roman commander or medieval knight, they still carry that spirit, that idea.

From Kingdom Come, p. 117: "The powers we have … the things we do … they're meant to inspire ordinary citizens" –Superman

Anette O'Toole, who has played both Clark Kent's mother in the television show *Smallville* and Superman's love interest, Lana Lang, in "Superman III" said: "I think we need Superman. I just think we have to have him. He's hope. We have to believe that there's someone who can save us. We have to believe that there's someone who can make it OK."[343]

When Christopher Reeve called "Superman" writer Tom Mankewicz to ask his advice on writing what would become the box office bomb "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace," Mankewicz said, "He called me and I said, "Chris, you want to stay away from anything Superman can cure."" The idea being that we cannot have our heroes solving our problems. In that movie, Superman tries to rid the world of all nuclear weapons. But the problem with that was that in the real world, those weapons of doom were still nestled in their silos. It's up to us to get rid of them, not Superman. Our heroes have to make us believe that we can solve our own

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[341] "Superman Returns," 2006

[342] Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 1:22:10.

[343] You Will Believe, 1:23:47.

problems. We have to have that star to shoot for. The writers and artists who depict these heroes cannot presume to solve problems in comics that persist in the real world. It is only in that disjunction that our heroes, our superheroes, fall powerless. In the February, 1940 edition of *Look Magazine*, Superman solved World War II in two pages, when in reality, the war, and the horrors that went with it, lasted another half decade. Not even Superman could change that. And it is in that disjunction that even Arthur fell powerless. Henry VII, a Tudor monarch, went so far as to name his first-born son Arthur in order to bring about the fabled return, but the boy died before he could take the throne. The pressure of the Tudors claiming Arthurian descent seemed to doom any attempt to bring about Arthur's return by force. We can't make our heroes come. They serve us only in our memories, and on our pages.

So why do we, today, in our age of science and of reason and of horrible doomsday weapons the likes of which can only be matched by comic book super villains, keep this spirit of the Arthurian, this seemingly naïve childish hope alive? If these heroes, Arthurian and occasionally messianic though they may be, cannot solve our problems, what use are they?

Because sometimes, even the most skeptical of us, the most jaded and bitter of us, the most cynical of us, the most educated of us, when we are in our own blackest night, when we are in trouble, in need, or even just afraid in the dark, have that welling up of the heart that urges us to look up in the sky and wonder: is that a bird …?

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