In the Name of the King

From King Arthur to Captain America:
The Arthurian Roots of Modern Superheroes

by Ryan I. Gorcey

Journalist, Communications Professional, Independent Scholarly Writer
U.C. Berkeley, High Honors in English, 2008

Prospectus

In this completed manuscript, I use an interdisciplinary approach spanning literary analysis, critical theory, philosophy, anthropology, and historiography to argue not only that ***King Arthur was the first superhero****, but why that should matter to academics, comic book fans, pop culture scholars, literary critics, film studios, lovers of high fantasy, and to the general public alike.* ***In a world that needs healing and heroes more than it has in decades, this book is about community, connection, compassion, and hope.***

What makes a great comic book superhero? That's the question that artists, writers, filmmakers, and other creatives have been asking for nearly a century. For every Batman there's a Cat Man, for every Superman there's an Asbestos Lady, for every Wonder Woman a Blue Snowman, and for every Catwoman, there's a horribly miscast and plotless movie with only a tangential relationship to the source material.

You could fill a book with all that entertainment executives don't know about superhero narratives, and with what academia has yet to understand about them. Not to be too presumptuous, but this is that very book. If you want to know why and how the most iconic, the most enduring, the most consistently relevant and timeless superheroes work, this is the book to read. What makes a great comic book superhero? While the simple answer is that which makes any great story, great – people, and a respect for both the stories they tell and those who read them – there's something even deeper, something more elemental at work.

Four days after the public release of Marvel's "Iron Man," in 2008, I turned in my senior honors thesis at Berkeley: 189 pages using literary analysis, historiography, anthropology, and philosophy to trace all superheroes back to a single common ancestor, the first example of a class of literary characters that includes Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Spider-Man: King Arthur. I had spent three years researching the thesis under the tutelage of medievalist Prof. Jennifer Miller and Prof. Stephen Best, U.C. Berkeley's Rachael Anderson Stageberg Chair in English and the director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

At the time, there was little comic book scholarship to speak of. I was cautioned not to go into the field, because there just wasn't a future in it. Throughout the past 16 years, though, the pillars of my argument — the DNA of the Arthurian — have formed the foundations upon which the most successful expressions of the world's richest franchises are built.

In late 2023, inspired by the recent flowering of academic discourse surrounding superhero comic books, and the growing community of comic scholars, I was encouraged by several in that community to revisit my thesis. Over the last seven months, I have edited, revised, expanded, deepened and overhauled it into the 350-page manuscript it is today.

Through the life I've lived since I submitted the original, through the career path I followed, in the life experience I've acquired, I have seen just how profoundly important this Arthurian DNA is to the way we tell stories and pass along oral tradition even in a post-modern society. I've gained the maturity and perspective to tell a deeper, more expansive story showing how the very first knight in shining armor was more than just a fairy tale. It binds us, connects us, and suggests a novel theory of historical transmission that defies classification into any single area of study.

Abstract

Modern comic book superheroes have traditionally been considered the "low" or "popular" culture inheritors of ancient and Classical heroic literature featuring demigods (Hercules, Perseus, Alexander, Achilles, Gilgamesh) and biblical heroes (David, Samson). That orthodoxy, though, fails to address a 3,000-year gap in storytelling during which a fundamental shift had to occur: Heroes went from hyper-local amoral strongmen and self-interested demigods to possessing a strong ethical code and being animated by a broad pro-social moral mission.

Arthurian myth or lore stands alone in the Western canon for its unique attributes and ubiquity. Over 1,500 years, it has become cultural shorthand and its core elements exist "in the air" — maintained by a collective knowledge base that has been passed through oral folk tradition as well as written literature. The means of the Arthur story's transmission, its modes of production, its persistence as a trans-cultural touchstone, and its tradition of generational and collaborative authorship is shared by only one other such ubiquitous body of literature: superhero comic books.

A study of three singular kingship texts contained within the Auchinleck Manuscript — a 14th-century anthology of works produced with the intent of reclaiming English language and history from the Normans — serves as the entry point into an examination of millennia of heroic literature, stretching from Biblical Jerusalem to sub-Roman Britain to the eve of the American Revolution to an unassuming two-story home in suburban Cleveland, all leading to the discovery of the missing link that turned the heroic into the superheroic: King Arthur. This single,

continuous lineage from Classical and Biblical heroes to our modern-day costumed crusaders is centered around Arthur as the transformational, game-changing inflection point.

Market Competitors & Similar Books

Previous investigations into the origin of superheroic narratives have focused on ancient antecedents, on the turn-of-the-century proto-superheroes like Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel, or on the late-1930s emergence of Superman and Batman. They primarily deal with how superheroes reflect the cultural zeitgeists of their times, and how they serve as a mirror for both society and their creators. Comparative works in this search for origin and the evolution of the genre in the 20th and 21st centuries are Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (2006) by Peter Coogan, Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society by Jeffrey K. Johnson (2012) and the award-winning Understanding Superhero Comic Books: A History of Key Elements, Creators, Events, and Controversies by Alex Grand (2023).

Previous efforts which have linked modern superheroes with their most ancient antecedents — the gods and demigods — and looked at superheroes through the valid lens of modern mythology — include Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman by Don LoCicero (2007), The Mythology of the Superhero by Andrew R. Bahlmann (2016), and Heroes Masked and Mythic: Echoes of Ancient Archetypes in Comic Book Characters by Christopher Wood (2021).

One book has broken the genre barrier between Arthurian high romance narratives and superhero comic books: Superheroes of the Round Table by Dr. Jason Tondo (2011). The book establishes the comic genre as a cousin to Arthurian myth, Spenser, and Shakespeare, opening up readers of the Western literary canon to considering comics, and vice versa.

Why We Need Superheroes by Jeffrey Kahan addresses the sociological and anthropological functions of superheroes, making points in 2021 that I made in 2008. My point here being: I considered all of these things as an undergraduate more than 16 years ago, and has not been until the last decade or so that there is an ecosystem of academics supporting and encouraging the serious study of superhero comic books, and a market for that type of examination.

All of these books — published after I had submitted the original thesis which remains as the core of this manuscript — have now primed the general public and the academic community for this book.

Fans of both superhero comics and Arthuriana are smarter and more sophisticated now than ever before, and because of social media and the Internet, they are in near constant discussion with one another. The popularity both Texts continue to enjoy is a testament both to their aspirational themes and to the timeless fundamental elements they share.

Prospective Audience

Rather than this being a purely academic exercise or a work solely focused on the genre's modern and post-modern expressions, this book builds a bridge through time and space through accessible, entertaining, and at-times-cheeky prose (think Reed Tucker), balancing the grad-level jargon with anecdotes, easy entry points, and concise summaries of decades (sometimes centuries) of textual tradition. I take the journey with the reader, guiding them through the stories that defined their childhoods, addressing them directly, and anticipating their questions. It's more of a conversation than a seminar.

How big of an audience could this have? How many people have bought tickets to see superhero movies in the last 16 years? Also, let's take a look at the 105 million posts tagged "#bookstagram" on social media. Hero stories, high fantasy, and sword-and-sorcery narratives are by far the most common. This book not only accesses that audience, but holds up a mirror to the human experience and the need to tell (and to hear) inspirational and aspirational stories. With not just one, but two subject matters that have near-universal appeal in the Western world—Arthuriana and superheroes—it has the potential to tap into two very large markets.

Vital Stats:

Status:
DRAFT MANUSCRIPT COMPLETE

Current length:
- ~103,000 words (including bibliography, works cited, and front matter)
- 359 pages, 8.5x11 inches, double-spaced, in 12-point font

Publishing Status:
Currently proposing this manuscript to several other publishers and agents.

Potential Peer Reviewers

Dr. Jason Tondo, Ph.D., UC Riverside; College of Coastal Georgia
- jason.tondro@wizards.com

Dr. Peter Coogan, Ph.D., Michigan State; founder, Comics Arts Conference
- comicsstudies@gmail.com

Dr. Jeffrey Kahan, Ph.D., University of Alabama-Birmingham; University of La Verne
- jkahan@laverne.edu

Dr. Andrew R. Bahlmann, Ph.D., University of Nevada-Las Vegas; Snow College
- ude.wons@nnamlhab.werdna

John & Caitlin Matthews; independent scholars; John is a New York Times best-selling author of over 90 books on Arthurian legends and Grail studies;
- tigerna9@gmail.com

The Future:

Perfectly suited for both print and digital release, this book is a ready testbed for innovation in the web publishing space that access the innovations being made for digital comic books. There are numerous opportunities to create dynamic motion graphics out of specific comic panels cited herein. Extant prose text can be hyperlinked to both online resources and other publisher properties, so that exploration (and further purchases) are always just a finger-tap away. The music and film dialogue references that punctuate the work (and serve as titles for many chapters and sections) are opportunities for dynamic visual and auditory storytelling, making this book an engaging multimedia experience.

When published, this book will serve as the jumping-off point for a new wave of Arthurian expression, a deeper and more serious literary discussion of superhero comics, a further reconsideration of literary canon, and — more materially — a series of sequels. The possibilities for move-forward are many: an exploration of the so-called “dark-mirror” or “false hero” narratives, discussions on representation, Otherness, ethics, morality, and philosophy in superheroic narratives across all media, and perhaps even a new cinematic take on the mythical King, one made in the style of his cape-clad descendants.

Outline

Author's Foreword

Introduction: A New Mythology

Part 1: A Second Glance

I will erect a basic scaffolding of literary theory upon which the larger argument is built, and I will detail the historical and cultural barriers that have prevented superhero comic books from being put into dialogue with traditional forms of "high culture" literature for the vast majority of their existence.

> **Chapter 1:** I'm Not the Son of Some Roman God
> *Bridging the 3,000-Year Gap Between the Heroes of Antiquity and Modern Superheroes*
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> **Chapter 2:** Putting Away Childish Things
> *Dr. Frederic Wertham and the Dismissal of Comic Books*
>
> **Chapter 3:** Barred From the Bard
> *High Culture, Low Culture, and the Curious Case of Shakespeare's Disappearance*
>
> **Chapter 4:** Last Forever
> *The Thick Description and Acted Culture of Folk Art: How Comic Books Participate in the Same Functions as 'High Culture' Literature*

Part 2: This Is No Fairy Tale

I begin constructing what I will term the Figure of King Arthur: a comprehensive aggregation of the character which includes the totality of its historical roots (i.e. Arthur's historicity as well as the folk origins of the legend), how it has functioned in the wider culture throughout the centuries, Arthur's fictional biography (and what the changes to it say about the cultures that contributed to the story), and the character's journey through literature.

We will dig into the candidates for a historical King Arthur (or Arthurs), the origins of certain cornerstones of Arthurian myth, the implications of various theories surrounding Arthur's historicity, and how all of these facets contribute to Arthur's preeminence in medieval Britain and in the modern Western cultural canon.

I will introduce you to the concept of social authorship and the key difference between a Work and a Text, as defined by Roland Barthes, and the spheres of action inherent in folklore as defined by Vladimir Propp. Understanding that both Arthurian literature and superhero comic

books share these folkloric underpinnings and status as Text (as opposed to a Work or a text – little t) will help illuminate the rationale behind putting Arthur in dialogue with his costumed descendants, and connecting them all to the Classical and Biblical heroes of antiquity.

Chapter 5: A Name Half-Whispered
The Historical King Arthur
- *What's in a Name*
- *The Last True Roman*
- *The Legend of the Sword*
- *The Red Dragon of Wales*

Chapter 6: They're Inside of Me, They Still Live On
From Work to Text: Social Authorship

Chapter 7: The Soil Where All Great Art is Rooted
King Arthur, Superheroes, and Folktales
- *The Villain*
- *The Donor*
- *The Magical Helper*
- *The Princess and Her Father*
- *The Dispatcher*
- *The Hero and the False Hero*

Chapter 8: Incorruptible and Everlasting
Investment of Meaning in the Text's Language of Symbols and Signs

Part 3: Secret Origin

How the literary King Arthur arose from his possible historic antecedents, and why the Auchinleck manuscript – the oldest monolingual Middle English manuscript in existence, yet little-known outside of academia – is singularly illustrative of Arthur's form, function, and evolution beyond the page, in the real world. It is in this manuscript where Arthur redeems the shortcomings of King David and Alexander the Great to become the ideal of kingship, and it is in that negotiation of previous examples of kingship that we discover that special game-changing ingredient that Arthur introduced which elevated him from hero to superhero, and which elevated his literary descendants above their contemporaries of the early 20th century— masked vigilantes, mystery men, and pulp adventurers like The Shadow, Doc Savage, Zorro, and the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chapter 9: The Courage of Achilles
Analyzing the Ancestors

Chapter 10: Of Arthour and of Merlin

How the Auchinleck Manuscript Puts King Arthur in Dialogue With Previous Examples of Kingship
- *Three Kings*
- *Boy King*
- *Warrior King*
- *Giant Slayer*
- *Outsider*

Chapter 11: A Very Strange, Enchanted Boy
The Arthur of the Auchinleck
- *The Englishing of Arthur*
- *Converting the King*
- *Once and Future*

Chapter 12: A Big, Round Table
Arthur's Gift: A Mission

Part 4: A Hero Comes Home

We make our way into the Age of Superheroes with some of the earliest crusaders: Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. By examining how they each uniquely recall the Figure of Arthur – in their formation, development, morality, modes of production, means of transmission, and particular character attributes – we see how modern superheroes fulfill the same roles and spheres of action that defined Arthur as a folk hero, then as a legend, then as a mythology, and always as the Once and Future King. We will also interrogate the specific ways in which they address Otherness and Outsidership – key functions of the most significant literary works.

Chapter 13: Fight for a New Dawn
The Gray Champion: Who Was That (Un)masked Man?

Chapter 14: Here Lies Arthur, the Once and Future King
Malory's Epitaph and Arthur's Return

Chapter 15: Cast Me Away, Take Me Up
A New Generation of Heroes Carries On Arthur's Legacy
- *From the Mouths of Babes*
- *Warrior Kings*
- *Giant Slayers*

Chapter 16: Turning Pain Into Power
How Superheroes Renegotiate the Terms of Outsidership and Otherness
- *The Immigrant Alien*

- *The Man Out of Time*
- *The Amazon*

Chapter 17: I Don't See Myself
The Crucial Role Otherness and Outsidership Play in Forming the Moral and Ethical Foundations of Arthurian – and Therefore Superhero – Narratives

Part 5: Holding Out for a Hero

A discussion of how superhero comic books – like Arthuriana – grapple conceptually and materially with societal, cultural, and religious norms, including how and why individual superheroes have taken on the fraught role of secular messiah. Throughout this section, you will see — through detailed examples — how superheroes recall their Arthurian roots, how Arthur prefigured the sociocultural niche comic book superheroes occupy today, implying a new, revolutionary theory of historical transmission of cultural memory and storytelling. Finally, I open the door to the future, and what all of this means for the function of superheroic literature in an increasingly fragmented digital age.

Chapter 18: The Spark is Now a Flame
A New Mythology Arises as Arthurian Superheroes Multiply
- *Whosoever Holds This Hammer, If He Be Worthy …*
- *The Fastest Man Alive*
- *In Brightest Day, In Blackest Night*
- *"We're Ironmongers, Tony"*
- *SHAZAM!*
- *Whatever a Spider Can*
- *To Me, My X-Men!*

Chapter 19: It's Just Too Heavy for Superman to Lift
How Super Teams Inherit the Role of the Knights of the Round Table

Chapter 20: Random Notes of Parchment
From Social Authorship to a New Theory of Historical Transmission

Chapter 21: If I Go Crazy, Then Will You Still Call Me Superman?
Disseminated Social Authorship Invests Texts Like Arthur and Superheroes With the Flexibility to Stay Relevant While Retaining Their Timelessness

Chapter 22: It's Not Easy to Be Me
How Heroes Negotiate Real-World Horrors

Chapter 23: I Am Superman, and I Can Do Anything
The Search for a Secular Messiah

Chapter 24: Are You the Man Who Can Lead Us Once Again?
Of Loss, Death, and Resurrections of Heroes
- *Emerson's* Experience
- *The Death of Superman*
- *Cartoon Heroes and the Crystal Cave*

Chapter 25: Change the World
The Transcendence of Christopher Reeve
- *You Will Believe a Man Can Fly*

Chapter 26: We Can Be Heroes
Our Heroes – Past, Present, and Future – Live In Us: A Conclusion, and a Beginning

Note: *I would like to include approximately 40 images selected primarily from comic book texts, as well as images of paintings, depictions of medieval manuscript miniatures, film and television production stills, and film and comic promotional materials where fair use copyright allows. There will not be any tables in this book.*

Sample Chapters (~10,000 words)

Chapter 13: Fight for a New Dawn

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

A warrior lives for battle
And fights for a new dawn
A light inside keeps shining
Even when all hope and the world
Have moved on

– Matt Beilis, *Call Me Fighter*

In 1835, Nathaniel Hawthorne—author of The Scarlet Letter—penned a short story, entitled "The Gray Champion." The story tells of an incident that purportedly occurred during the American colonial period, when the colonists of New England revolted against King James II's chosen governor, Sir Edmund Andros. 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 ruling King of England (thereby nullifying Andros's authority), Andros had hired mercenary troops to quell uprisings in the city.[1]

On April 18, 1689, the people of Boston rose up and overthrew Andros, who, "holding office from the King, and wholly independent of the country," wrote Hawthorne, made laws and levied taxes "without concurrence of the people immediate or by their representatives." Hawthorne went on to list other offenses committed under Andros's rule: "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."

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[1] Coogan, 148

It's an incident certainly worth chronicling in its own right, but Hawthorne added a twist to the story of the colonists' revolt. Former governor Simon Bradstreet had stepped forward to calm a gathering mob, and to urge them to obey the authority of the king (by way of Andros). As a double rank of mercenaries advanced, the crowd feared a massacre, but then, a voice from the crowd rang out: "O Lord of Hosts, provide a Champion for thy people!"

It is a cry not unlike the refrain from Remy Zero's theme song for the television show "Smallville"—"Somebody save me!"—or lyrics from Styx's, "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 everything's gone wrong somehow." The names may have changed, but—in more than a century and a half—the sentiment has not: *Somebody, save us!*

The man who steps forward—or rather appears out of thin air—is unsurprisingly not a costumed and super-powered muscle man in a cape and tights. Though Coogan types this hero as an "avenger-vigilante" in line with Robin Hood—under his heading of dual-identity crime-fighter—both the description of this so-called Gray Champion and the words that he speaks go far beyond the scope of what those characters represent in the development of the superhero genre. Hawthorne writes that, in response to the 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."

He walks between the two groups, stopping about 20 yards from the colonists. Holding his staff high, he 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 (emphases mine):

> 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.

Eighty years after the Champion’s 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”), Hawthorne wrote that the same figure appeared on the occasion of the Boston Massacre on 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 American 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.”

This figure reaches both forwards and backwards. It prefigures the naming conventions—the *noms de guerre*—and pro-social mission of Superman and his ilk, and yet it also reaches back across the Atlantic, further back than the Great Britain of the 17th century, already over a century and a half past by the time Hawthorne was writing. The Gray Champion reaches back to the still wild and untamed Britannia of the sixth century.

First, take the Champion’s sword. The most prevalent civilian sword of the day in 1689 was a rapier, with an average blade width of 2.5 cm. 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.[2] However, there are two possible swords that *would* fit the bill: a medieval broadsword—a weapon that would have been used by the largely fictional medieval version of King Arthur—or our old friend the Roman *spatha*.

The typical broadsword (at over one meter long, weighing on average one kilogram with a blade 3.5 cm wide on average) or *spatha* (between 0.1 and 1 meter long and 4.3 to 6.1 cm in blade width) are both much heartier (in order to withstand broader, more powerful swings necessitated by their battlefield applications) and more robust than either the rapier or the smallsword, tools of more intricate, gentlemanly urban combat.

But the presence of a "heavy sword"—certainly a subjective description—is not enough, of course, to immediately say that this man dressed in Puritan garb can be read as a figuration of King 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. Having been awoken by "the cry of an oppressed people" from his "secret place," he is compelled to "appear once again on earth," with a "heavy sword" on his thigh and inspire the freedom-hungry colonists to fight back. Compare this with a passage from Book 21, Chapter 7 of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur:

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[2] Evangelista, 493

> 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 Book 21, Chapter 5 of Malory's work, which details Arthur's departure to his own "secret place," immediately following a scene where Arthur implores one of his knights to heave his sword Excalibur into the sea. (emphasis mine):

> 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.
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> **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.

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 is not that these are the New England colonies (juxtaposed against the old England across the Atlantic, and therefore implying a new beginning), or even that there is perhaps a gesture at a sense of the new evolving out of and then replacing the old (therefore England's heroes of old become the new 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 reputedly 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."[3] It was by the same mechanism that King Arthur sprung from folk tales of a unifying, violent warrior chieftain of sub-Roman Wales and into the realm of high medieval romance. That bloody history is tempered as the figure becomes the stuff of myth and legend. For Arthur, the reality of the bloodshed and violence that likely surrounded his historic reign became lost in the medieval chivalric trappings and knight-in-shining-armor rhetoric, but the core of the story remained, and it trickled down through the centuries like a mountain spring.

What this little-known Hawthorne work has provided is yet another historical bridge. When we began our journey, I addressed the fact that almost all current scholarship has taken as

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[3] Coogan, 150

gospel that superheroes are most closely related to the ancient heroes, which leaves an empty gap of nearly 3,000 years between the two traditions. With Arthur as the missing link and the Auchinleck stepping stones of David and Alexander before him, that gulf shrinks to 1,500 years (if we're citing his earliest sixth century origins). With the inclusion of Hawthorne's Gray Champion, the historical gap has been whittled down even more, weaving that enduring thematic connective tissue through examples of incremental evolution which give us a fuller and more complete picture of the superhero family tree and its most persistent traits (like a strong Roman nose). The echoes of the Arthurian that we see in the Gray Champion were in fact the first whispers of the age of superheroes, the fulfillment of a promise nearly a millennium in the making.

Chapter 14: Here Lies Arthur, the Once and Future King

Malory's Epitaph and Arthur's Return

"And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus*."

– Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte d'Arthur 21:7

One of the most enduring legacies of Sir Thomas Malory's take on the Arthur legend is the Latin epitaph above, which translates roughly to: "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king." Curiously, most of the sources Malory used in composing Le Morte d'Arthur—including Geoffrey's Historia—say nothing about this key element of the Arthur mythos that has become just as integral to the story as Excalibur. Three works preceding Malory 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. In it, Arthur sails away to the island of Avalon, where he says he will stay "A whyle to hele me of my wounde." When his remaining knight, Sir 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."[4] 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."[5]

In another of Malory's sources, the French romance *La Mort le Roi Artu*, there is a transcription of Arthur's epitaph, one which looks to build upon what had previously been simple

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

[5] Ibid., ll. 3550-3

eulogizing as it takes steps towards Malory's leonine hexameter Latin epitaph[6]: "CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIST EN SA SUBJECTION .XII. RIOAUMES."[7] While sources point toward a late-15th century composition of this (and Malory's) work[8], the concept of the return of Arthur—or of a great, near-messianic warrior—is a tradition that goes back as far as the late Roman Empire.[9]

The belief in a possible spiritual savior—a *Restitutor Orbis* (a World Restorer)—became popular at the same time as Rome expanded to Britannia, bringing the mystique of *Romanitas* (civilization) and the idea of the *Restitutor Orbis* with it.[10] This Roman concept likely served as the root for the Celtic oral tradition of a returning hero, which in turn served as inspiration for Malory's famous epitaph. While the sources Malory were divided on whether or not Arthur was definitively dead at the end of the story, Malory chose to acknowledge what was by then the long-standing Celtic oral tradition of a returning hero by allowing for the possibility of Arthur's survival. That, in turn, allowed for something more, something amazing, astonishing, and uncanny: a new kind of hero.

Arthur's redemption of his kingly predecessors' flaws, his rebooted Auchinleck narrative, and his broad pro-social mission and moral code all served to alloy the ancient heroes and the

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

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

8 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.

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

10 Much of the material regarding the idea of a *Restitutor Orbis* is gleaned from the chapter "The Unextinguished Light" in Geoffrey Ashe's The Discovery of King Arthur.

royal heroes into a singular figure, something more than the sum of his parts. He didn't just inspire today's superheroes; he fathered them. He lives on *in* them. The presence of the roles he shares with previous heroes—the Outsider, the Novice/Neophyte, the Warrior King, and the Giant Slayer—are integral to the most commercially and critically successful characterizations of modern day superheroes. The phenomenon of the Arthurian Text provided the necessary elision of previous heroic literary traditions, which—with the advent of his broad pro-social mission and moral code—created a novel archetype which the superheroes of today have inherited.

The grand, broad, egalitarian, unifying pro-social **Mission** Arthur brought to the (Round) table had *never* been associated with the heroes of old. Without that Arthurian mission and the moral code that undergirds it—indeed without both the Text and the Figure of King Arthur—comic book superheroes would be unrecognizable.

The dragon windsock of the *Legio VI Victrix* and the art on Arthur's shield—be it crowns or the red dragon of Wales—each fulfill an embryonic form of the **Chevron**, not only representing Arthur and his mission, but his rank and heritage.[11] Though he is later typed as an English hero—not a British one—the red dragon and both of his names (*Art-ur* = Bear Man, or Pendragon = Chief/Head Dragon) recall his Welsh origins.[12] While Arthur's armor is hardly spandex and a cape, it does act as an instantly-recognizable, iconic, biographical **Costume**. Geoffrey of Monmouth describes Arthur's armor thusly (emphasis mine):

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[11]"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." – Helmut Nickel. "Heraldry." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

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

> 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.[13]

As for **Powers**, Arthur is depicted as having nigh-superhuman strength and durability—in the Auchinleck, he dispatches hundreds of foes single handedly. He is also aided by his unbreakable, supernatural sword and by the magic of his wizard Merlin in much the same way that Billy Batson had his powers bestowed upon him by his own wizard at the Rock of Eternity.

Arthur doesn't exactly have a conventional secret **Identity**. However, like Batson, he does start out as an anonymous squire before pulling the sword from the stone in pre-Auchinleck redactions. Conceding that that interpretation on its own is a bit tenuous, we can strengthen it: If it is this anonymous squire's unwitting worthiness that allows him to pull the sword from the stone, then he is like Skinny Steve—we see him before the transformation as a good-hearted young man who grows to become "The Bear," or "Bear Man," or the Boar of Cornwall, or "Pendragon"—"Head Dragon." If we consider those various appellations as his *noms de guerre*, combined with the fact that he rides into battle behind either the dragon pennant of a Roman legion or a shield emblazoned with the coiled red beasty, then he certainly fulfills the Identity convention in spades.

To rephrase the question at the start of this work: Why, 70 years after Superman first leaped into action, did comic book superhero stories become so popular? Because they returned to their Arthurian roots, following in the footsteps of the king more faithfully than ever. Beginning with 2008's "Iron Man," the stories started being told by people who revered them as

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[13] Historia Regum Britanniae, Book IX, Ch. 4.

children, and those who have understood their resonance and their vast potential for allegory, and treated their stories with the attendant respect, dignity, and care as befits such serious literature. To quote Geoffrey of Monmouth:

> "The house of Romulus shall dread his courage, and his end shall be doubtful. He shall be celebrated in the mouths of the people and his exploits shall be food to those that relate them."[14]

It's no wonder why superheroes have generated such absurdly high box office receipts, why studios are banking entire summers on do-gooders in tights, why Kevin Feige pushed out Ike Perlmutter. In the form of these modern comic book superheroes, Arthur has fulfilled his promised return.

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[14] Historia Regum Britanniae, Book VII, Chapter III

Chapter 15: Cast Me Away, Take Me Up

A New Generation of Heroes Carries On Arthur's Legacy

Pull me from the stone, fight alongside me
Take me up, cast me away

– Hail Your Highness, *Take Me Up, Cast Me Away*

At the turn of the 20th century, Arthur made a surprising comeback in popularity. The most significant resurrection "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,"[15] the very time period where we see the first seeds of the superheroic being sewn: Hawthorne had just written his Gray Champion, and 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, a symbol that has come to stand as the Kryptonian glyph for "hope."[16]

In just 13 pages of Action Comics #1, published on April 18, 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster told the story of an alien refugee from a shattered world—a world which was destroyed because it refused to recognize the danger that it was in.[17] This character's story was elemental allegory which captured the zeitgeist in a universally understandable and accessible language.

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

[16] Initially, there was no deeper meaning behind the S-shield. It wasn't until "Superman: The Movie" in 1978 that Marlon Brando's insistence that Jor-El wear the S as a family crest that the idea took root. The folklore surrounding the shield developed over the next few decades. In Jon Ostrander's 1999 maxi series, "The Kents," it is revealed to have been derived from a Native American symbol for a snake, which is considered to be a healer by the tribe native to Smallville's area of Kansas. It's not too far a distance from a snake to a serpent to a royal Pendragon. In the first-season *Smallville* episode "Rogue" (2002), Lex Luthor (Michael Rosenbaum) shows Clark (Tom Welling) a battle cuirass won by Alexander the Great, which bears a jeweled snake symbol on the chest approximating Superman's eventual chest symbol. The 2004 series Superman: Birthright by Mark Waid, is the first time that Superman's S-Shield is said to be both a coat of arms for the House of El, as well as the Kryptonian symbol for "hope."

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

Superman commanded the popular imagination like few characters had before because, despite his story's science fiction trappings (rocket ships and alien worlds), there was something familiar, something evocative, something that had the ring of Truth—not literal truth (little t), but something more profound.

Three years later, in the pages of Captain America Comics #1 (March, 1941), Timely Comics (now Marvel) introduced its third superhero, following the 1939 introductions of the android Human Torch and the anti-hero Namor, the Sub-Mariner.[18] The first glimpse the world got of this new red, white, and blue hero made quite a splash: The cover art featured this new superhero—Captain America—delivering a right cross to Adolf Hitler's jaw, drawn by the legendary Joe Simon and Jack Kirby.

Superman and Captain America—the two standard bearers for what would become the two dominant comic book companies—each fulfilled the four roles, and would go on to give rise to multiverses of heroes who—to this day—carry the Arthurian standard.

From the Mouths of Babes

When Stan Lee pitched his first teenage superhero (a 15-year-old nerd by the name of Peter Parker) to his editor, Tim Goodman, Goodman's response was less than encouraging: "You say that he's a teenager? A hero can only be an adult! Teenagers are sidekicks!"[19] What Goodman could not have grasped at that early juncture was that many superheroes, like Arthur, would already possess key facets of their MPIC before society considered them mature adults. They

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

[19] 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.

would be novices, amateurs, inexperienced in the world of adults. They would be somewhat naive, idealistic, and unjaded. But that was the point. They had to be full of promise, to retain the innocence and optimism of youth, unfettered by the cynicism that comes with age, failure, and disappointment.

Superman came to Earth as an infant, and in established comic continuity preceding John Byrne's retcon with his 1985 Man of Steel run, the young Kal-El grew up in an orphanage before he was adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent. His superpowers as a young child were—to say the least—troublesome for the head of the orphanage, who was overjoyed when the Kents came to take him off his hands. They rescued this star child and raised him as their own, expecting no recompense or benefit. They bequeathed to him a morality based in honor, integrity, respect, humility, sacrifice, generosity, magnanimity, and selflessness.[20]

The man behind the flag-adorned costume of Captain America was coded as lacking stereotypically masculine traits befitting a virile man of action in 1940s America: Before his transformation, Steve Rogers was an aspiring art student[21] who, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, was intent on enlisting 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 Kirby as emaciated, sickly, and scrawny in the opening panels of the book, and he was summarily declared 4-F—unfit for combat. Unbeknownst to Rogers, a shadowy figure whispers to a general that this young man would be perfect for a new experiment called Project: Rebirth.

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[20] Action Comics #1

[21] Even in the 1940s, a liberal arts degree or career wasn't exactly considered "essential" to any war effort. Yet, Rogers is shown to be an exceptional and inhumanly quick artist in both film and comics. Following the purported death of his love interest Sharon Carter, he even quits superheroing to become a commercial artist and eventually wound up drawing himself in Captain America comics for Marvel editor Mike Carlin (Captain America Vol. 1 #237 by Chris Claremont, Roger McKenzie, Sal Buscema, and Don Perlin).

Rogers is secreted off to a top-secret installation, where a mysterious Dr. Reinstein (unbeknownst to Rogers, Reinstein is an alias of Dr. Abraham Erskine, the man in the shadows) injects him with the Super Soldier Serum and subjects him to a catalyzing radiation dubbed "Vita Rays." 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 as soon as Rogers' transformation was complete, a German agent screams, "Heil Hitler!" and murders the good doctor, who takes the secrets of the process to his grave.[22]

Rogers, now the only American Super Soldier, is given the mantle of Captain America, and is placed within the ranks of the army, posing as a bumbling, uncoordinated goof. Dye his hair black and give him glasses and he may as well have been Clark Kent. Rogers is frequently taunted by his fellow soldiers, and when he disappears from boot camp to take on secret missions as Captain America, he is somehow always mysteriously excused for his absence, much to the chagrin of his commanding officer, who thought of him as "a lazy incompetent and could never understand why the highers-up kept excusing Rogers's repeated disappearances."[23] In a very real sense, Rogers was pretending to be the "squire"—a novice and uninitiated warrior—but in reality, he is in fact the real warrior king, as it were.

Additionally, because of the serum's side effects, Rogers has remained eternally young—perpetually stuck in his late twenties or early thirties—even as other heroes, after his re-introduction, call him everything from "Old Man" to "Grandpa" to "Grampa Steve."[24]

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[22] Simon, Joe and Jack Kirby. Captain America Comics #1 (March, 1941). New York: Timely Comics.

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

[24] Straczynski, J. Michael (w) and Ron Garney (p). "The War At Home, Part 6 of 7." Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 1 #537 (February 2007), Marvel Comics.

Warrior Kings

As a warrior, Superman uses his physical abilities—great strength, ice breath, heat beams from his eyes, super speed, and flight—to defeat threats foreign, domestic, and extraterrestrial. In his earliest issues, he battles abstract social ills like exploitation and corruption as often as physical opponents. It's a never-ending battle which evokes the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. In a more allegorical sense, Superman fights the ills of his adopted species in hopes of being accepted into the human community, even though he will always remain apart. 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.[25]

In an era where nuclear war and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust loomed large, Superman of course did his fair share of battling mad scientists who threatened the post-war world order. When corporate moguls emerged as the dominant cultural villains, Superman's arch-nemesis Lex Luthor abandoned the mad scientist role and took on *that* form.[26] Similarly, as Arthur moved through time and cultures, he fought enemies ranging from Saxons to Muslim Saracens to other foreigners, as his enemies evolved to take the faces of those who beset whatever culture he inhabited, just like Captain America—though not Steve Rogers—ended up fighting Communists in the 1950s.

Captain America is, at his core, a soldier. When Chris Evans's Rogers visits the elderly Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) during the first act of "Captain America: Winter Soldier," he confides in her that, when he was finally unfrozen, "I thought I could throw myself back in and

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[25] Oropeza, B.J.. "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.

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

follow orders, serve," because that's what he knew. In his origin film, 2011's "Captain America: The First Avenger," we see him using guns, grenades, and flamethrowers, just as he did in his earliest comic book adventures.

In the comics, Cap eventually evolved away from using firearms and explosives, and began to show a particular distaste for lethal force, preferring instead to use his fists and his shield—a defensive weapon—to disable or neutralize a threat.[27] His indestructible shield—a weapon evocative of Arthur's Excalibur in more ways than one—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 chest insignia (depicted in multiple sources as variously serving as his family crest, or as the Kryptonian symbol for hope) into the shape of a triangular shield when Captain America and Superman are hybridized in Super Soldier #1 (Apr. 1996.), a Marvel-DC crossover event (one of several throughout the decades) in which the two universes (and their respective heroes) merged together.[28]

Captain America's disc-shaped shield (likely the shape of any shield a historical Arthur would have used)[29] is also an adaptation of the American flag just as Arthur's shield or battle standard was a red dragon, a creature which became the national emblem of Wales.

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

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

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

Giant Slayers

Though giant slaying is easily identified throughout many historic narratives, the specific role of Giant Slayer *vis a vis* Arthur and superheroes serves an aspirational and inspirational function: In their greatest and most consequential battles, even these larger-than-life figures willingly engage in contests in which they are the underdog and face long odds, contests in which they contend against something larger and more powerful than themselves, whether that power is expressed as political, cultural, financial, or the literally physical.

Superman certainly fights his fair share of gigantic enemies—giant robots in the Fleisher cartoons, elemental giants bent on excising the alien from the planet Earth,[30] the hulking abomination Doomsday, the metafictional Anti-Monitor (larger than a planet), Titano the Super-Ape (hey, Beppo the Super-Chimp has to earn his keep, too), and, lest we forget, one of his recurring enemies is a literal sentient, artificially intelligent sun called Solaris. Yet, recall that in his first adventures, he contends with corruption and graft, as shown in the pages of Action Comics #1.

Cap, too, often takes on opponents that far outmatch him in size, strength, and power. In 2012's "Avengers," his first mission as an Avenger sees him go toe-to-toe with a literal god in Tom Hiddleston's Loki, armed with only a shield and his fists while Loki (again: *a literal god*) also has a staff powered by what we later find out (in 2015's "Avengers: Age of Ultron") is an

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

Infinity Stone, one of the most powerful artifacts in the Marvel universe.[31] Literally and figuratively, Captain America fights the Nazis and their fascist ideologies. His greatest foe—the Red Skull—is the embodiment of everything that Hitler stood for.

In Marvel's Civil War line-wide event in 2006, Captain America opposes the implementation of the Superhuman Registration Act, which would require any individual with superpowers be registered in a government database (like a handgun), and if they seek to do good as superheroes, they must agree to be monitored and trained by the government (not unlike Rogers himself). Despite the fact that it would establish his own experience as standard practice, Cap realized that a centralized database of secret identities administered by the federal government (a metaphorical giant if ever there was one) would be catastrophic for individuals who a) may be discriminated against, b) may be targeted for physical harm or intimidation, c) may be forcibly recruited by criminal elements through extortion or blackmail, d) rely on their anonymity to ensure their safety and the safety of their loved ones, or e) may disagree with the policies and positions of any current sitting government, party, or appointed administrator.

As mighty and as seemingly invincible as superheroes are, though, they are still vulnerable. They can still feel fear, inadequacy, longing, ostracism, and pain, both literal and emotional. They have to. That's why it is so crucial to consider how—especially in a post-modern world that is getting smaller, faster, and more complex by the day—comics as a whole

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[31] An Infinity Stone or, in the comics, an Infinity Gem, is an immensely powerful primordial artifact tied to one of the essential aspects of existence. They are: Power, Space, Time, Soul, Mind, and Reality. Essential reading and viewing: Marvel's cinematic Infinity Saga—particularly "Guardians of the Galaxy" (2014), "Dr. Strange" (2016), "Avengers: Infinity War" (2017) and "Avengers: Endgame" (2018)—along with "Thanos Quest," a two-issue arc in September-October of 1990 by Jim Starlin (w), Ron Lim (p), John Beatty (i), and Tom Vincent (c), and the three consecutive series that it led into: "The Infinity Gauntlet," "The Infinity War," and "Infinity Crusade."

have negotiated the role of Outsider, a loaded label for a role in which many critics see superheroes falling short.

Chapter 16: Turning Pain Into Power

How Superheroes Renegotiate the Terms of Outsidership and Otherness

When you've been fighting for it all your life
You've been working every day and night
That's how a superhero learns to fly
Every day, every hour, turn the pain into power

– The Script, *Superheroes*

When I first wrote this thesis, it was woefully lacking in diversity. Time and life experience have opened my eyes to that fact, which is partially what's animated the bulk of my revisions. The role of the Outsider was the most difficult for me to grapple with, given my last two decades of lived experience. I was 22 when I wrote the original thesis. Now at 38, having lived through repeated surges in antisemitism, the political upheaval centering on which version of history is appropriate for students to learn, the widespread inability (or lack of motivation) to differentiate between fact and opinion, the dumbfounding normalization and proliferation of Nazi-era eugenics-based racial replacement theory, the cultural polarization of our country, the Black Lives Matter movement, the virulent hatred spewed toward the LGBTQIA+ community, and skyrocketing instances of racially or religiously-motivated violence, I see the world in a much different way.

How could superheroes be Outsiders when, to be frank, the vast majority of them have been cis-gendered white heterosexual Christian males for nearly a century, and when comics (and comic fandom) have had a truly and profoundly horrific track record when it comes to toxic misogyny? It's a very legitimate and necessary question to ask, and a significant portion of the post-modern scholarship done in the last two decades on superhero comic books has rightly

focused on the overwhelming lack of diversity among classic characters. The first Black superhero (Black Panther) didn't debut until 1968; the CCA precluded the inclusion of any openly LGBTQIA+ characters until Marvel's Northstar came out in 1992 (13 years after his debut); and the list of crimes against women in comics is both long and unspeakably grotesque, as illustrated by the abduction, rape, brainwashing, and forced impregnation of Carol Danvers in Avengers #200, after which her Avengers teammates congratulate her on her rape child and applaud her sudden decision to forgive her abuser and head off happily into the sunset with him.[32]

The most commonplace crime against women in comics is that seemingly all female superheroes have to fight crime in spandex so tight you could tell if Black Widow has intestinal polyps, sky-high stiletto heels, and nary a sports bra in sight. Not exactly the choicest attire for running, leaping, and chasing down bad guys, but boy, does it do wonders for the male gaze. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, wear combat boots, body armor, and apparently some very supportive undergarments (when's the last time anyone saw a clear outline of Spider-Man's … ahem … little web shooter?).

Then, there are the hyper-sexualized, anatomically-impossible proportions and poses in which superheroines are drawn. In 2014, Marvel knowingly brought in renowned erotic artist Milo Manara to create a variant cover for Spider-Woman #1. The limited edition cover, which showed the titular heroine Jessica Drew in a pose that has to be seen to be believed, drew swift and widespread criticism. Not only was the pose awkward and inexplicable in terms of its

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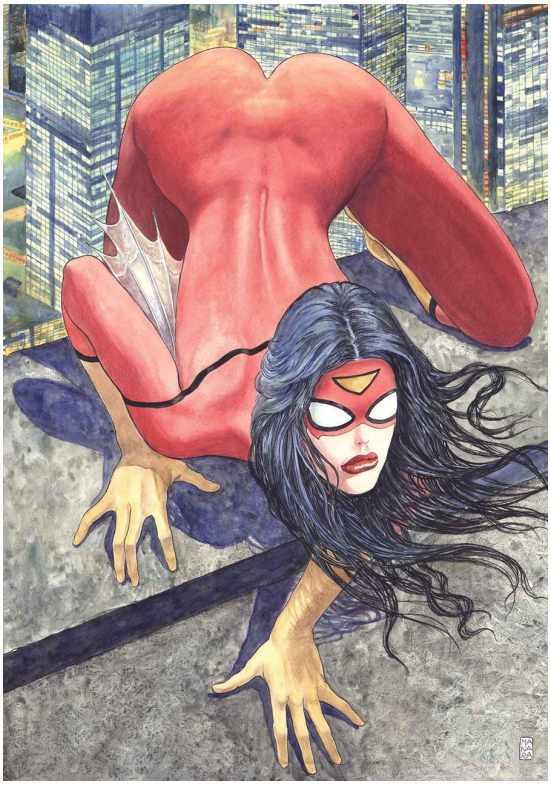
[32] Further reading: http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/index.html

practicality *vis a vis* crime fighting or wall-crawling, but it featured Drew with her hindquarters impossibly raised over a building ledge, presenting her lady bits to the city below.



Manara was well-known for his work in erotic art, and had been working steadily since 1969, so he was a known quantity, and the work itself was not atypical of his style. The question leveled by many was: Why would Marvel—in an era where the industry's treatment of female creators, characters, and fans was already under intense scrutiny—make the choice to commission a cover of a strong, independent, female superhero in a position that not only defies logic, but one in which Spider-Woman's spine defies the limits of basic anatomy?[33]

I could easily continue to list all the myriad ways in which superhero comic books have diminished, debased, and dehumanized women—often with dismissive, patronizing, bordering-on-casual nonchalance by male characters—and other marginalized groups, but suffice it to say that my post-modern contemporaries have justifiably taken the white-Christian-hetero-cis-male-dominated mainstream comics industry to task for such an abysmal track record. Comic books are, like any art form, documents of acted culture. For better or worse, they reflect the societies

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[33]Abad-Santos, Alex. "No One Liked Marvel's Porny Spider-Woman, and the Company Listened." *Vox.com*. 23 Sept. 2014, https://www.vox.com/xpress/2014/9/23/6836155/marvel-spider-woman-milo-manara-canceled. Accessed Mar. 7, 2024.

in which they are produced, both the good and the bad. But, at their root, they are (and always have been) an agent for change. Recall what I wrote *waaaaay* back in Part 1:

> Much like early Hollywood, early superhero comics' status as a fringe art form had "attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them," such as "[i]mmigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts." That is precisely why, in the aftermath of Dr. Wertham's book, superhero comics were barred from engaging in some of the most fundamentally important functions of literature—the examination of the world through allegory and critical thought, inviting conversations around hard questions, and the discussion of weighty or difficult ideas and concepts.

With that in mind, let's consider the context of superhero comic books' somewhat checkered history with Outsidership and Otherness, which are critical elements in the formulation of the Arthurian superhero.

The Immigrant Alien

The first modern superhero, Superman, was created on the eve of World War II by two teenage sons of European Jewish immigrants. His alien origin and immigrant status firmly place him in the category of the Other: He is the Last Son of Krypton, the lone survivor of a doomed race, and yet he grew up in middle America. Chunks of his very homeworld—radioactive Kryptonite—are in fact *lethal* to him. He doesn't really *belong* anywhere, and his greatest enemy, Lex Luthor, constantly reminds him of that.[34] The symbolism of one oft-repeated scene depicting Superman floating outside of Lex Luthor's office window is quite explicit in this regard: Inside the window is the world of the connected, the rich, the human. Outside is the world of everyone else, the little people, those who do not matter. Yet, there Superman is, floating with arms

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[34] 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."

akimbo, declaring confidently, defiantly, and silently—with nothing but his presence alone—that he will not simply be ignored. Nevertheless, Luthor takes great pleasure in keeping his foe on the outside.[35]

Even among his own people, Superman is ostracized. In DC's 2008-09 story arc, "New Krypton,"[36] Superman is told by his own aunt, Alura In-Ze, that he is not even welcome on his reborn home planet. His home away from Metropolis is the Fortress of Solitude, with different iterations located in either the Arctic or the jungles of the Amazon. That "home" is loneliness incarnate, stocked with relics of worlds and of times so remote as to be beyond man's comprehension, reach, and understanding.

While the horrific, unimaginable scale of human tragedy that was the Holocaust would not be widely known until six years after Superman debuted, Siegel and Shuster were the sons of a world—the Old World—that had long been plagued with antisemitism, and at the time of Superman's debut, was already under the jack booted heels of Adolf Hitler's Nazi armies. Because of swelling antisemitism and the prevalence of isolationism in the United States at that time, Superman couldn't be overtly coded as Jewish, but if you've been to Hebrew school, it's hard not to read his birth name—"Kal-El"—as almost Hebraic. A Superman fan with some pop culture credentials, KISS rockstar Gene Simmons (the stage name of Israeli-born Chaim Witz), understood the allusions of the Superman 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

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

[36] Johns, Geoff. "New Krypton." Action Comics Vol. 1, #873, DC Comics, March 2009.

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."[37]

Rather than fleeing the Egyptians, though, Siegel and Schuster's creation was escaping a world his parents knew to be doomed. Krypton served as an allegory for Europe, where centuries of simmering antisemitism had piled up like dry kindling, waiting for Hitler's fiery propaganda. Though World War II was just beginning, the history of the Jewish people had taught Siegel and Schuster that there would be only one end that could result from Hitler's rhetoric, though they could not possibly have imagined the scale of the Nazis' Final Solution.

Even though Superman never explicitly fought Nazis—as Captain America did—Siegel and Schuster sure found a way to do just that. Their creation's *nom de guerre*, "Superman" is a translation of the German "übermensch." Students of philosophy will recognize that term as having originated as an intentionally nebulous and vague term coined by German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche in 1883. After his breakdown in 1889, Nietsche's sister Elisabeth served as his guardian. An early believer in Teutonic superiority and the wife of antisemitic agitator Bernhard Föster, she secured the rights to her brother's manuscripts upon his death and subsequently edited them "without scruple or understanding," according to her own virulent beliefs.[38] Her editions of his works were subsequently twisted and misinterpreted, posthumously turning him into an early Fascist philosopher. These distorted views were appropriated by the

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[37] 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. 46:59

[38] "Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Mar. 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elisabeth-Forster-Nietzsche. Accessed 11 June 2024.

Nazis, who used them to justify their own notions of racial purity and Aryan superiority.[39] Yet, Superman, instead of being the picture of Aryan perfection—with blond hair and blue eyes—as his name might imply, Kal-El had the fair skin, dark hair, and light eyes of an Eastern European Jew.

Hitler's chief propagandist Josef Goebbles was quoted in *Das Schwarz Korps*—the SS's weekly newspaper—as saying: "Jerry Siegellack [German for sealing wax] stinks. Woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don't even notice the poison they swallow daily." To read that their creation had inspired the Nazi Megaphone himself to resort to schoolyard-level taunts had to feel pretty good for two Jewish high school kids from Cleveland.

Both Superman's implicit and explicit outsidership—inherited from his creators—speak to every reader, young or old, who at some point in their life had ever felt separate and apart, ostracized and alone, including children who've ever been part of the foster system. Early on in his publication history, neither Superman nor his guardians knew about his alien origins. He was entrusted to an orphanage, unsure of why he had the abilities he had, and why nobody would want him. He eventually became an *adopted* orphan, not unlike T.H. White's Wart—the young Arthur who pulls the sword from the stone in the 1958 novel The Once and Future King.

Despite his enemies' weaponization of his Outsidership as a weapon, it is from that Outsidership that Superman gains strength in a very literal sense: His unique Kryptonian physiology enables him to accomplish astounding physical feats. He is an immigrant, yes, but since his adoptive American parents gave him a connection not only to his new country, but to

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[39] Additional reading: https://philosophynow.org/issues/148/Men_of_Steel_Superman_vs_Ubermensch

his new planet, he became an aspirational figure for newly-minted or aspiring Americans. He was also the ideal immigrant for readers whose families had long since moved past their migratory history and considered themselves "native" Americans: He assimilated in the heartland of America, going by his human/American name—Clark Kent—rather than his Hebraic-sounding Kryptonian birth name, just as European Jews who changed their names (or had them by immigration agents) at Ellis Island. While he enthusiastically deployed his inherited strength to fight for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way" as Superman, he hid in plain sight as a neurotic, bespectacled, mild-mannered-yet-wisecracking reporter, subverting the Jewish stereotypes of the day by turning them into a disguise for greater power. Then, he uses that power to protect those without any. In his first appearance, he is presented as "Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need" (Action Comics #1, Page 2, Panel 5). In his first issue, Superman saves a woman sentenced to the electric chair for a murder she did not commit, teaches a domestic abuser a lesson, foils potential rapists, and uncovers an arms dealing corrupt senator fomenting a war in South America.

Superman became the literal poster boy for fighting for the little guy. In 1949, DC (then National Comics) produced a 12x18-inch brown paper school book cover for the Institute for American Democracy, an offshoot of the Anti-Defamation League. Drawn by Superman artist Wayne Boring, the image shows Superman addressing a group of young people which conspicuously includes a teenager of darker skin color, an Asian-American youngster, and a young woman.

" … And remember, boys and girls, your school—like our country— is made up of Americans of many different races, religions and national origins," Superman says. "So … if YOU hear anybody talk against a schoolmate or anyone else because of his religion, race or national origin—don't wait: tell him THAT KIND OF TALK IS UN-AMERICAN."

Below, in bold print: "KEEP YOUR SCHOOL ALL AMERICAN!" So, according to Superman himself, even at the onset of the Cold War and McCarthyism, the true meaning of "the American Way" is defined by diversity, acceptance, and egalitarianism. Anything else is un-American.

The Man Out of Time

Captain America, despite his remarkable abilities, blond hair, chiseled physique, and government sponsorship, is an Outsider in many different respects. While in today's America, being of Irish descent is an unremarkable biographical note, it wasn't that long ago that Irish immigrants—like Steve Rogers' parents—were discriminated against with the same venom usually reserved only for Jews, Blacks, Chinese, and Italian Americans. Anti-Irish sentiment (and

related anti-Catholic sentiment) in the United States was still very much alive during the time the first Captain America comics were published.

By the time Rogers had reached adolescence, he was also an orphan and a physical weakling. In 2011's "Captain America: The First Avenger"—the final MCU Phase 1 film before 2012's "The Avengers" assembled—pre-transformation Steve Rogers lists each of the places he's been beaten up by bullies as he's driven to the laboratory where he will eventually become Captain America: "I know this neighborhood. I got beat up in that alley. And that parking lot. And behind that diner."

"Girls aren't exactly lining up to dance with the guy they might step on," he sheepishly tells an incredulous Agent Peggy Carter, who—along with Dr. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci)—sees in this skinny Steve the pure heart of a hero. In the barracks at Fort Lehigh the night before the "90-pound asthmatic"—as he's called by Tommy Lee Jones's General Phillips—takes the Super Soldier Serum, Erskine and Rogers have the following exchange:

> **Erskine:** The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great; bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because the strong man who has known power all his life, may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows... compassion.
>
> **Rogers:** Thanks. I think.
>
> **Erskine:** … Whatever happens tomorrow, you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are, not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

Erskine speaks from sad experience. His genius in coming up with the Super Soldier Serum could only take him so far in his native country of Germany. "So many people forget that the first country the Nazis invaded was their own," Tucci's Erskine tells Evans' Rogers. In the comics, Erskine is Jewish, forced to flee the Nazis because of his heritage, and the same is true

of his celluloid counterpart. While little is said of his family in the main-line comics, a promotional digital comic series produced for the film revealed that the Erskines had been apprehended while trying to escape Germany, and that Erskine's wife and daughter were sent to Dachau to ensure his cooperation in Hitler's super soldier development program, Projekt Ubermensch. They would not survive.[40]

Erskine's was a story all-too-familiar for Cap's creators. Like Superman's Siegel and Schuster, they were both Jewish: Joe Simon was born Joseph Hymie Simon and Jack "King" Kirby was born Jacob Kurtzberg. Like Cap, they were the sons of Jewish immigrants from Europe. Like Cap, their forebears had been discriminated against, excluded, disenfranchised, and exiled, and seen state-sponsored violence claim whole towns and villages of Jewish victims through pogroms and Inquisitions. Like him, they knew little of power—physical or otherwise. However, they did know that the strength that comes when power and justice are tempered with mercy, compassion, patience, and understanding is an enduring one, and one much more powerful in the long run.

When the war ended and there was no one left to fight—no clear, objectively evil force to be vanquished—Stan Lee had Cap subsisting on battles against communist opponents, but sales sagged, and the book was summarily canceled. The stories weren't true to who Cap was. The heart of the character created by Simon and Kirby did not and does not reside in his role as an avatar of the United States—a vassal to fight the fights of the established order. It's something greater, but at the same time, more intimate.

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[40]Van Lente, Fred. Captain America: First Vengeance, Part 2. Marvel Comics, March, 2011.

In 1964, after the introduction of heroes with problems like the Fantastic Four—whose identities were public—and Spider-Man—whose powers made his civilian 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. It had been 20 years since Cap had last thrown a punch, and Lee largely ignored his 1950s version of the character, instead claiming that *this* one was the real McCoy, frozen in ice since the end of the war.

The same incident which caused Rogers to be thrown into the freezing North Atlantic (and hence suspended animation)—which saw him and Bucky try to disarm an explosive drone plane launched by the villainous Baron Zemo—also provided the character with a new sense of pathos: His sidekick Bucky had ostensibly perished in the explosion that sent Rogers into the ocean. While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder would not make its first appearance as a diagnosis until the DSM-III in 1980, this unfrozen Cap was tortured by guilt and trauma, displaying a vulnerability and psychological complexity that would access many anxieties of the generation about to serve in Vietnam.

There was no guile or deception in Cap's makeup. There was no cynicism, jaded skepticism, or fatalistic resignation, yet he was certainly not an unblinking, unquestioning agent of the government, either. There was only the desire to do the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing. He was every bit a member of the Greatest Generation.

While he started out as a soldier, he became something more. Here's that earlier quote from Evans's Cap in "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" in full context:

Steve Rogers: You should be proud of yourself, Peggy.

[looks at Peggy's family photos by her table beside her, showing her with her husband and children]
Peggy Carter: Mm. I have lived a life. My only regret is that you didn't get to live yours.
[Sees Steve is downcast]
Peggy Carter: What is it?
Steve Rogers: For as long as I can remember I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve. It's just not the same.
Peggy Carter: *[chuckles]* You're always so dramatic. Look, you saved the world. We rather... mucked it up.
Steve Rogers: You didn't. Knowing that you helped found S.H.I.E.L.D. is half the reason I stay.
Peggy Carter: *[takes Steve's hand]* The world has changed, and none of us can go back. All we can do is our best, and sometimes the best that we can do is to start over.

Yes, he was a soldier, but he always wanted to do what was right. By the end of the film, the audience finds out what comic readers have known for decades: Captain America doesn't ever just blindly follow orders. He fights for a better America, one that lives up to the promise of its founding ideals, even if those ideals have since been undercut by the flawed histories of the men who wrote them into the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

"He felt he didn't belong to our age," Lee said. "He was, as they say, an anachronism. He belonged back in the '40s. 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. Little by little, the one-time tool of the authorities began to more closely resemble the spirit of the emerging youth counter-culture—one which grew up with the safeties, securities, and certainties of the 1950s social order, but was now

questioning the legitimacy of that order, angrily and rebelliously expressing their feelings of alienation and exclusion.[41]

And yet, despite feeling alienated because of the 20 years of history he missed (or 70, in modern incarnations), Cap doesn't act recklessly, angrily, or destructively. His form of 'rebellion' is fighting for the ideals of the United States of America, not what any government of the moment says is the American ideal. After the Watergate scandal, Rogers chose to shed the mantle of Captain America—albeit briefly—in favor of the caped guise of Nomad, the man without a country. In a storyline which included the government claiming it owned the suit and the shield —and could therefore do whatever it wanted with them—Rogers voluntarily resigned and became The Captain. Eventually, the government sees the errors of their ways when their new, more extreme (and violent) Cap goes insane. In a reflection of the idea of social authorship, it is not the singular authority or Auteur (which both share a Latin root meaning "originator" *or* "promotor") who owns the hero, but the people.

Indeed, as David Newman—a writer for Richard Donner's "Superman" (1978), 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."[42]

The Amazon

In early superhero comic books, there was no greater outsider than Diana of Themyscira, otherwise known as Diana Prince or Wonder Woman. Her creator, Dr. William Moulton Marsten,

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[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. 43:55.

[42] You Will Believe, 10:38.

submitted his first draft comic script in February of 1941 to Maxwell Charles Gaines—who created the American comic book format in 1933 when he founded All-American Comics (the forerunner of DC Comics). In that script, Dr. Marsten described his creation: "The NEW WOMEN thus freed and strengthened by supporting themselves (on Paradise Island) developed enormous physical and mental power." The comic, Dr. Marsten said, was meant to chronicle "a great movement now under way—the growth in the power of women." Wonder Woman would leave Paradise Island to fight fascism with feminism, and to fight for "America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women!"[43] Egalitarianism? Fighting against a potential foreign invader who threatened the safety of the world? The inheritor of a lost culture? That sure sounds very Arthurian. Just one problem: She wasn't some acceptable type of Outsider—like the white males Arthur (bastard and orphan though he was) or Superman … She was (gasp!) a woman.

When critics claimed Wonder Woman wasn't sufficiently dressed, Gaines hired renowned child neuropsychologist Dr. Lauretta Bender— the head of the children's ward at Bellevue Hospital in New York—as an editorial consultant.

Having lost her husband Paul Schilder in a car accident, leaving her to raise three children on her own, Dr. Bender—already a renowned expert on aggression and the inventor of a psychological test designed to evaluate visual-motor maturation in children that is still used today—began to study how children cope with trauma. In her 1940 study with medical resident Reginald Lourie, she—unlike Wertham—directly investigated the effects of comic books on children hospitalized for behavioral problems. Through direct observation and clinical study,

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[43] Lepore, Jill. "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman." *Smithsonian.Com*, Smithsonian Magazine, 1 Oct. 2014, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/.

Bender and Lourie concluded that superhero comics were "the folklore of this age," and that they worked, culturally, in the same way as fables and fairy tales. Instead of being inspired to do harm to themselves or others, or being tempted by hidden sexual or homosexual subtext in comics, Bender and Lourie observed that the children found comfort and protection in superhero stories.

Dr. Bender wrote that Wonder Woman comics, in particular, displayed "a strikingly advanced concept of femininity and masculinity" and that "women in these stories are placed on an equal footing with men and indulge in the same type of activities." Take one guess as to who didn't like that. Yep: Dr. Wertham, who showed his special disdain for the character during the 1954 Senate subcommittee hearings in the wake of his book, Seduction of the Innocent. Dr. Wertham responded to Dr. Bender's study thusly: "As to the 'advanced femininity,' what are the activities in comic books which women 'indulge in on an equal footing with men'? They do not work. They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent. Even when Wonder Woman adopts a girl there are lesbian overtones."[44]

We've already covered what those hearings wrought—the dismissal of superhero comics as literature, as a serious artform, and as a legitimate medium for sociocultural critique—but there was collateral damage, as well: This was the era of McCarthyism, when anybody (particularly members of the artistic community) who didn't toe the line could be blacklisted as a Communist sympathizer. To the "[i]mmigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts,"[45] such blacklisting would be

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[44] Lepore, Jill. "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman." *Smithsonian.Com*, Smithsonian Magazine, 1 Oct. 2014, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/.

[45] Abad-Santos, Alex. "The Insane History of How American Paranoia Ruined and Censored Comic Books." *Vox.Com*, 13 Mar. 2015, www.vox.com/2014/12/15/7326605/comic-book-censorship. Accessed 7 Mar. 2024.

professional suicide, so they had to find other ways—more covert ways—to invoke the struggles of the Other. That's when the reading public began to see a whole new breed of hero: the X-Men (allegories for you-name-the-ism discrimination led by a man bound to a wheelchair), Daredevil (the blind orphan son of a boxer disgraced for fixing fights out of necessity), Spider-Man (social outcast and teenager), Black Panther (the king of an African nation so secretly advanced that didn't need—and in fact avoided at all costs—the white world's patronizing colonialism masquerading as charity or assistance) Luke Cage (a Black superhero who wears chains to symbolize the bondage of his ancestors … it's a little harder to explain his chest-baring yellow blouse), an African-American Green Lantern (John Stewart, a decorated Marine Corps sniper and professional architect) and other Others. Superhero comics have told the stories of the Other up to the level that contemporary society could accept, and even pushed beyond that limit as the decades wore on.

The heroes who evolved out of Arthur have continued to evolve in the ways they negotiate otherness, just as we do. The four roles that were clear and distinct are now no longer so clearly performed, as Outsider and Novice/Neophyte have collapsed into one another. Or, maybe, there was always some necessary overlap: They are all facets of the broader human experience, and we all know how messy that can be. As individuals, we move through each of these roles throughout or lifetimes.

Each of us has had to do battle, physically, emotionally, psychologically, professionally, or even internally. We all like to think that we're fighting for something bigger, that we're fighting for what's right, or what's best for us, or what's best for our families. Those fights are sometimes no more brutal than when we're fighting our own demons, our own worst impulses.

We need something to keep us pushing forward, to keep persevering, to stay in the ring. Because, after all, who among us hasn't felt like we were fighting giants? Like we were outgunned, out-maneuvered, out-classed, or had no business being in the fight? Those giants could be our own insecurities, a rigged system, or a schoolyard bully. The point is: I'm willing to bet that most of you have been there. Each of us has. We've all been too young, too short, too small, too naive, too inexperienced. Until we weren't.

We've also—most of us who love superheroes—been underestimated, counted out, belittled, dismissed, diminished, overlooked, and yeah, sometimes, walked all over. Hey, it's the life of a nerd. As smart as many of us can be, let's be honest with ourselves: Many of us have been novices in the fine art of social interaction for most of our lives. Asking that first girl to a middle school dance can sure seem like you're fighting Goliath with only a slingshot, am I right? But, I digress.

Even those of you who weren't social outcasts have felt at some point like you didn't belong, like you weren't worthy, like you had no business being in a certain group, club, or situation. Sometimes Outsidership is a prison of our own making. Sometimes, we've all felt like a frog wearing dress slacks, whether because of lack of experience, youth, or insecurities. Sometimes, membership in two groups means you belong to none at all. Sometimes we all feel like we belong on the Island of Misfit Toys.

More often than not, though, Outsidership and Otherness are far from the imaginings of an insecure soul. They can be very real, deeply demeaning, and very demoralizing: Ostracism, hatred, bigotry, discrimination, the very real threat of physical or sexual violence, emotional and verbal abuse, dehumanization, and isolation. That feeling that all eyes are on you because you're

the only Black woman in the engineering class, the only girl going out for the baseball team, the only Jewish family in your neighborhood, or the only gay brother in a fraternity can be soul crushing. Even worse is when there is no light at the end of the tunnel, no star to shoot for, no example to emulate, no proof that it really does get better. That's why we look to our superheroes. We need that wish fulfillment, that feeling that everyone is looking at us not with disdain, but with basic human respect. It's not so much a desire to belong, as it is a need to be accepted and welcomed for who we are, not what the world tells us to be, or who we think we should be.

It should be no surprise that my favorite superhero, Captain America, has plenty to say on the subject of feeling like an Outsider—an Other—both on film and in the comics. One of his most oft-twisted speeches comes in the midst of the 2006 Civil War event.

To set the stage: When a despondent Spider-Man, realizing he has chosen the wrong side in supporting superhuman registration, knowing that he has betrayed the truth that got him into crime fighting to begin with, turns on the pro-registration forces. On the run, he asks "Grampa Steve"—the man leading the charge against registration—for guidance. The following pages come from *Amazing Spider-Man #537*, by J. Michael Straczynski, Ron Garney and Scott Hanna.

To be clear: This isn't Cap being a mouthpiece for what would become the alt-right a decade hence. He is not advocating for the dogmatic adherence to any personal "truth" or "alternative facts," regardless of any evidence to

the contrary. His opposition to the registration act is not an argument for the Second Amendment, because while any registration acts in superhero Text have been likened to registering firearms by their proponents, there is a very crucial nuance that gets lost in meme-ification and over-simplification: these *aren't* firearms or weapons; these mutants and superhumans are *people*. The last time a majority population started putting numbers on human beings, it ended with gas chambers.

No, Captain America doesn't like bullies, no matter where they're from. When asked by Agent Carter in "Captain America: The First Avenger," if he has something against running away from the repeated beatings of neighborhood street toughs, Chris Evans's Skinny Steve replies: "You start running, they'll never let you stop. You stand up, you push back, [they] can't say no forever, right?"