

# **In the Name of the King**

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

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## *Author's Foreword*

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. Not to be too presumptuous, but this is that very book. If you want to know why and how and why the most iconic, the most enduring, the most consistently relevant and timeless superheroes work, this is the book to read. While the simple answer is what makes any great story – 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.

I had felt this something in both my head and heart ever since I eagerly clambered into my mother's bed for nightly story time, clutching my teddy bear as she read to me the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

It was because of my affinity for those tales — that medieval anchor of Arthuriana — that I decided to go into my pre-1800s requirement as a U.C. Berkeley English major with a fairly open mind. I was already staying up late at night, watching the History Channel, seeing again and again new specials on the “true” King Arthur, inspired by the just-released historical action epic starring Clive Owen and Keira Knightly, which I saw in its first week at my hometown Edwards Cinema. The film itself reawakened that little boy who dreamed of knights and magical swords, and the television specials aroused my intellectual curiosity.

Intrigued, I kept investigating deeper and deeper, reading earlier and earlier texts. Then, as a sophomore, I took English 114A, a course on medieval cycle dramas taught by the most passionate medievalist you'll ever meet: Professor Jennifer Miller. She was the first person (who was unrelated to me) who didn't laugh when I mentioned superheroes and King Arthur in the same breath. That course – and the several others I subsequently took with Prof. Miller, opened my eyes to the inextricable links between literature past and present, and how one constantly resurrects and recalls the other, bestowing precious layers and complexes of meaning.

Then, Prof. Miller introduced me to the Auchinleck manuscript, which provided the academic bedrock upon which I would build my very own Baxter Building. The more I read of the Middle English tale of Arthur and of Merlin contained therein, the more I remembered those same themes, those same character traits, those same reverential tones. Except, I wasn't remembering those bedtime stories. I was remembering the stacked longboxes I spent my childhood filling with the fruit of my weekly allowance: superhero comic books.

My synapses seemed almost to close completely, each neuron touching all those around it. "Yes," I thought, "this is *it*." My obsession with the heroic and super heroic — my addiction — became my life, my soul, my purpose. The hallmarks of my childhood—comic book superheroes and King Arthur—were all of a sudden not just mythical figures beyond my reach, but rather partners – dare I say even family. They were on my mantle, in my t-shirt drawer, on my bookshelf, and in my speakers. They surrounded me. They were part of me. I was a storyteller, after all, and they were the *best* stories – the kind that never ended.

The best way that I can describe the journey of writing this actually begins with music. This is why many of my chapters have titles directly taken from popular music. Music vibrates at a frequency that neither prose nor poetry can begin to enter — the frequency of the heart, the

soul, the mind, and the imagination. It taps emotion and spirit, and so very often, that very thing that resists being bound to corporeal form. One of my musical refrains is lifted from a song by Train: “When I look to the sky, something tells me you’re here with me.”

If there is but a single sentence that can represent this work, it would be that single line. The once and future king, the flying caped wonders, and the illogical, irrational hope we place in them—all in one single line. And it is with this thought, in this frame of mind, that I wish you to enter upon my work. I ask you to read it with the heart that we all had as children, the heart that we perhaps still hold, deep inside our cynicism and underneath our adult sensibilities. It is all I ask, that you open your heart and mind to the way we once were — each of us — when the world was still new, and when we still believed that a man could fly.

The vast majority of what follows was written when I was between the ages of 20 and 22. I initially was inspired by former Batman editor Jordan B. Gorfinkel and Eisner-nominated Fanbase Press editor-in-chief Barbra Dillon to revisit, revise, and submit my collegiate thesis for publication. But, as soon as I started, I couldn’t stop. While the bedrock, the bones, and the substance of the argument remain the same, this is far more nuanced, developed, and inclusive than the 189-page paper I submitted as a 22-year-old to Prof. Stephen Best in Wheeler Hall in May of 2008. I have made stylistic edits (thanks to the intervening decade I spent as a journalist), smoothed over some of the rough edges, and turned it from an academic work of literary analysis into something I hope has broader appeal. But, I’ve also re-ordered the chapters, re-structured the argument, fleshed out some of the more skeletal ideas, delved deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of heroic narrative, elevated the narratives relating to marginalized communities, reckoned with the medium’s sometimes-shameful history of misogyny and underrepresentation,

and added some much-needed historical context that allowed me to illustrate just how integral it is for both Arthur and superheroes to be Outsiders and Others.

Even given all of that, this piece remains fundamentally the work I submitted four days after John Favreau's "Iron Man" debuted in theaters, and its core thesis is the same: ***King Arthur was the first of a class of literary characters that today we recognize as superheroes, and it is due to the influence of that Arthurian tradition that superheroes hold such an enduring place in the popular imagination.***

I will close this foreword with a recollection of one of the many conversations that I had on this subject around my hookah in my room at AEII, with papers scattered across the floor, on the bed, and on just about every flat surface. Whenever one of my brothers would come into that cloudy room, there would invariably be some superhero movie playing on my 13-inch TV-VCR combo. "Research?" they'd ask. "Yep!" I'd say with a smile.

On this one occasion, one of my fraternity brothers, Josh Nimmo, was having a bit of a personal crisis. He was wondering if indeed his philosophy major was the right thing for him. He turned to me after taking a puff of pensive smoke, and asked, "How do I find my passion?" I put down whatever book on King Arthur or superheroes I was dogearing at the time, leaned back, crossed one leg over the other, and sighed. "It finds you," I said. "I got lucky."

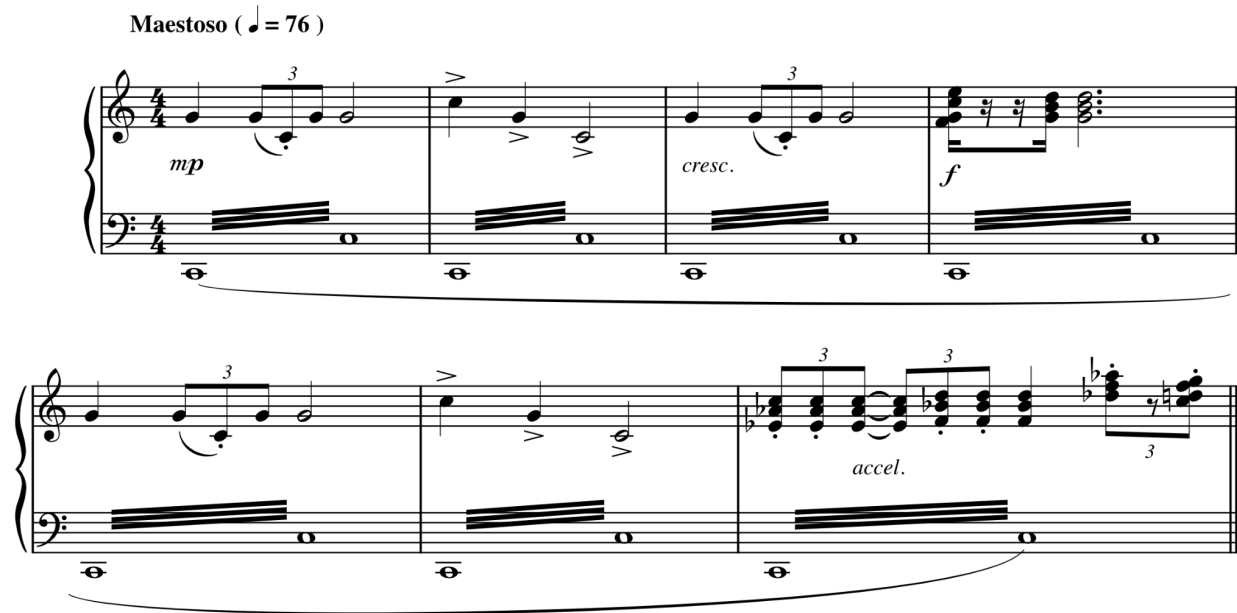
This passion for the heroic and superheroic has with me my whole life, written in my storyteller DNA. It's why I am who I am. The need to understand it has punctuated the most pivotal times of my life, and in that pursuit of understanding, I have discovered not only truths about the world around me, but truths about myself.

I had to dig deep within my soul to find not just the "how," but the "why" of it all, and then I had to live my life in order to gain much-needed perspective. Researching and writing this

— and then revisiting it — showed me that I am not the only person who still looks to the sky in their times of need, hoping – waiting – for that flutter of a red cape or that flash of a sword. In continually creating and re-creating these heroes as we do – not just by putting pen to paper, but by putting head to pillow – we become part of a tradition stretching back millennia, spanning continents, cultures, and generations. We all, each of us, have participated in the great tradition of writing our heroes upon the parchment of our minds and our hearts, if not upon the pages of tomes or newsprint.

Each step on this journey – every late night during the two-and-a-half year odyssey towards completing the initial thesis, and then every twist and turn during the 15 years it took for me to return to it — has led me to a greater understanding of what these stories mean to us, and why building a bridge between Arthur and superheroes is so important.

Perhaps it is not the sky to which we should look for the heroes we so desperately seek, but into our own hearts. They live inside us, and they live on.



### *Introduction: A New Mythology*

In just 33 notes, over 70 years of history, social commentary, imagination, art, popular culture, and bedtime stories become as clear as the blue sky up into which those very notes urge us to look. Thirty-three notes, speaking to the child within us all, and to memories that are not even ours.

All over the world, the 33 notes above have become identified with a singular figure. John Williams' score for "Superman" (1978) has become so iconic and integral, that it is now as much a part of the DC Comics character as the S shield that stretches across his chest. As that film's director Richard Donner said, reflecting on his first viewing of the finished cut: "The music came on, and it said 'Superman!'"<sup>1</sup> There were no lyrics accompanying the melody that would soar over the film's opening credits, but it nevertheless spoke to Donner, a lifelong Superman fan. For him, it represented the signature of a new mythology.

<sup>1</sup>You Will Believe: The Making of a Saga. DVD. Prod. Constantine Nasr. New Wave Entertainment, 2006.

But what *is* mythology? How is it different from legend, a fairy tale, or local folk tradition? It's a foundational question to ask. So, let's get some definitions out of the way.

A **fairy tale**, as defined by America's most important folklorist Stith Thompson, is a series of motifs or episodes without definite locality that move in an unreal world filled with the marvelous. They are not thought to be literally true. They are highly versatile, adapting to the needs of the culture and the teller in the historical moment.<sup>2</sup>

A **legend** is a story, originating in folk or folkloric tradition (usually orally transmitted), that, though embellished, is grounded in and based on purported historical facts. In Folk Groups And Folklore Genres: An Introduction, American folklorist Elliott Oring defined legends as narratives which recount an episode which is "presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing." He went on to say that "the narration of a legend is, in a sense, the negotiation of the truth of these episodes ... at the core of the legend is an evaluation of its truth status." While the tellers and receivers of a given legend may themselves determine its level of veracity, that diversity of opinion has no bearing on whether the narrative is or is not a legend. It is a legend precisely *because* the question of truth is being entertained. "Thus," Oring wrote, "the legend often depicts the improbable within the world of the possible."<sup>3</sup>

Folklorist Linda Dégh and her husband Andrew Vázsonyi add another layer to the definition of a legend, regarding veracity and belief: "It is not necessarily the belief of the narrator or the belief of the receiver-transmitter that we have to consider; rather, we must consider, abstractly, so to speak, the *belief itself* that makes its presence felt in any kind of legend. The legend tells explicitly or implicitly almost without exception that its message is or

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<sup>2</sup> Thompson, Stith. The Folktale. The University of California Press, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Oring, Elliott. "Folk Narratives." Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction. Edited by Elliott Oring, Utah State University Press, 1986.



was believed *sometime, by someone, somewhere.*” (Dégh and Vazsonyi 118)<sup>4</sup> Legends, said Oring, often involve at least some element of the supernatural, and yet, “the legend never asks for the suspension of disbelief. It is concerned with creating a narrative whose truth is at least worthy of deliberation; consequently, the art of legendary engages the listener’s sense of the possible,” (Oring 125).

**Myth** (and by extension, mythology – a collection of myths cohering around a single central tradition) is a fusion of fairy tale and legend. Its veracity (truth with a little ‘t’) is not so important as its Truth. Myths concern the actions of divine, semi-divine, or supernatural characters. Myths are stories of the gods, stories of how the world came to be, of how cultures were created and shaped. They answer the question: *Why is our world the way it is, and what is my place in it?* Orning defines a myth as a story “generally regarded by the community in which it is told as both sacred and true. Consequently, myths tend to be core narratives in larger ideological systems” (Oring 124). Within the field of folklore, and within the context of the culture from which the originating folk narratives that become myth emerge, these stories are considered deeply true. They are sacred stories that are True in a profound way. Ironically, the word “myth” is more often colloquially used to dismiss such stories as fanciful fairy tales, diminishing and discounting both their importance and their deeper Truth.

And indeed, that is what contemporary superheroes have become for many around the world, not just in the United States. In that same “Superman” film, Superman himself disputes this categorization:

**Lois Lane:** Clark . . . said that you're just a figment of somebody's imagination. Like Peter Pan.

**Superman:** Clark, uh. Who's that? Your boyfriend?

**Lois Lane:** Clark? Oh, Clark, no, he's nothing, he's just, uh . . .

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<sup>4</sup> Dégh, Linda and Andrew Vázsonyi. “Legend and Belief.” Folklore Genres. Ed. Dan Ben-Amos. USA: University of Texas Press, 1976.

**Superman:** Peter Pan, huh?

**Lois Lane:** Uh-huh.

**Superman:** Peter Pan flew with children, Lois. In a fairy tale.

There is a very meta, real-world argument to be found in the subtext of this exchange, especially when it is juxtaposed against the film's promotional tagline: "You will believe a man can fly." That argument: Superheroes are not fairy tales; they are, in fact, something far more substantial, more consequential, more True.

Dismissed as fanciful fairy tales early in their history, the literary value and deeper socio-cultural implications of the emergence of superhero comic books had been largely unexplored up to the time this work was originally authored. It was not until the decade that immediately preceded the submission of the original version of this thesis that superhero comic books and comic book superheroes had begun to emerge even as a semi-legitimate (though oft-dismissed) field of academic inquiry. While the genre was still not elevated to the academic status of literature, the seminal works in that nascent period of inquiry did firmly establish the connections between the stories of today's superheroes and the mythologies of the ancient world.

One of Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel, said of his Man of Steel that he "conceive[d] of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so."<sup>5</sup> The first Flash – DC Comics' original Scarlet Speedster, Jay Garrick – debuted in January of 1940 with a winged helmet evocative of the Greek messenger god Mercury. In 1962, Journey Into Mystery Vol. 1 #83 told stories of the Asgardian thunder god Thor, who made the transition from hero of Viking lore into a bonafide superhero. Instead of Achilles leading his famed Myrmidons in the assault on Troy in the heroic verse of Homer, we now have the super soldier Captain America leading the Allies onto the beaches of Normandy.

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<sup>5</sup> Coogan, Peter. Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre. 1st. Austin, TX: Monkeybrain Books, 2006. pp. 117

The deeds of these heroes of old – from which these modern marvels sprung – were spread through verse and song. Nobles would gather in banquet halls to hear heroic songs in praise of famous deeds sung by professional singers and even by the warriors themselves. The great Israelite warrior hero King David was himself “skillful in playing the lyre.”<sup>6</sup> Songs of heroes and their adventures were sung to inspire soldiers before battle, to supply the warriors with “models of ideal heroic behavior.”<sup>7</sup>

The same is now true of comic book superheroes, which is why I began this introduction with music, an art form so keenly evocative that just a few notes can improve your mood or remind you of a lost love. Music can psych you up before a big game, or break even the most stoic facade hiding a tidal wave of grief. It is our emotional shorthand, powerful and elemental, representative of both the self and of the larger culture. It connects us with each other and with our shared human past. When Williams’ Superman theme was introduced, it felt *awesome* – not as in the common surfer slang, but in the true definition of the word: Worthy of or inspiring a sense of awe, a sense usually reserved for expressions of the divine.

At the time this was originally written as an honors thesis in 2008, the now-defunct website UrbanGeek.net had indexed, alphabetically, 127 “supersongs” that at the very least mentioned a comic book character, from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to Superman. Now, from rap to hip hop to country to nerdcore to filk (folk music with a sci-fi theme), there are countless ditties that bear the fingerprints of comic book superheroes. Whole amusement parks are now themed to bring visitors into the world of caped wonders. Satires and spoofs run the gamut from objectively crude and ham-handed cash grabs to high-minded artistry that examines well-worn tropes and themes. Shelves at discount big-box stores are filled with t-shirts for men,

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 16:16

<sup>7</sup> “epic.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 April 2008. <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-50868>>.

women, and children bearing the images of comic book covers, superhero symbols, and superhero-lore-inspired deep-cut meta humor. Superheroes permeate global popular culture so thoroughly that the importance of overseas markets for superhero films dwarfs that of the domestic box office. They served as the seeds for political and social debate, they have become subjects of endless discussion, and they have taken on much greater significance than their originally-disposable medium would indicate. They have grown (and flown) far beyond the box of simple childish fairy tales to which McCarthy-era critics had hoped to confine them. Beyond the iconic themes of John Williams, Danny Elfman, and Alan Silvestri, there are a great many compositional elements of comic book superheroes that, like music, intentionally evoke that unique blend of humility, dread, excitement, and wonder reserved for gods, goddesses, champions and marvels, elements that have made them a phenomenon unseen in global culture in more than a millennia.

In the first act of 2005's "Batman Begins," mobster Carmine Falcone (Tom Wilkinson) tells Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne: "You're Bruce Wayne, the Prince of Gotham; you'd have to go a thousand miles to meet someone who didn't know your name." To find a person completely untouched by superheroes, you'd have to probe deep into the densest forests of the Amazon to interview heretofore uncontacted peoples. This ubiquity – this utter permeation of the surrounding global culture – is one that stretches from John Williams' theme all the way back to the ancient Classical heroes, yes, but also – crucially – to some of the greatest heroes of the so-called Dark Ages, a link that – as of this latest edition – has still gone largely unexplored. Even 15 years after I initially posited this thesis, with all the billions upon billions of dollars that have been made on the backs of comic book superheroes, precious little has been done in the

way of connecting comic book superheroes to the valid and canonized literary traditions that shaped Western culture, save for Dr. Jason Tondro's 2011 work, Superheroes of the Round Table.

Dr. Tondro made an exceptionally-well-stated case for the value of studying comic books as literature. He placed them into conversation with medieval literature. He approached the topic through the lens of heroic romance – a purely literary path – and yet, there has been little followup. He got so close to what I'd written three years earlier, but stopped just short of considering the bigger picture.

Maybe I've been too ambitious, but I wasn't satisfied with merely building a bridge. The original question that animated this work is indeed a profound one that breaks the bounds of literary theory and stretches into philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural memory, and psychology. It is a question I have obsessed over for my entire life: *Where do superheroes come from?* Why, suddenly, in 1938, did a guy in spandex – wearing his undies on the outside – become such a global icon? How could such a character touch off a worldwide cavalcade of costumed do-gooders that have marched their way across genre-spanning multiverses and held a mirror up to cultural norms? The only way I can describe the pursuit of the answer is that it is something more consuming than an obsession, something harder to kick than an addiction, and it led to one simple, undeniable conclusion: ***King Arthur was the first superhero.***

I'll let that sit for a moment. It's the culmination of my life as a nerd, a geek, a storyteller, an outsider, a writer, and a dreamer. Every time I utter that bolded sentence to someone – a friend, a relative, my poor wife, a colleague, a comic industry expert, a big-two editor, an independent publisher, an unwilling coworker I've cornered at an office party – their eyes *light up* with the same realization that hit me. It may seem profoundly simple, but its implications are far-reaching: To assert that comic book superheroes are descended from and inheritors of

Arthurian literary tradition is to suggest a trans-cultural, transcreative<sup>8</sup> means of historical transmission and cultural memory – a radical new theory of literary evolution that upends the traditional author-work-reader relationship, elevates the importance of the reader-as-author, rejects the orthodoxy of established literary canon, and expands the definition of literature to encompass radical and subversive subcultural artforms.

With all that at stake, I knew – from the moment this particular lightning bolt hit my brain – that I would need to support my claim with mountains of robust support from a variety of disciplines, from sociology to anthropology to philosophy to literary theory to historiography to world history. It took me two years to construct my original argument, and it's taken me 15 years to not only hone my writing craft in the trenches of journalism, but to acquire the perspective, life experience, and worldlines to – hopefully – make my point a bit more elegantly, smoothly, inclusively, and entertainingly.

In the first part of this book, 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.

In Part 2, 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.

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<sup>8</sup>A portmanteau of “translation” and “creation,” transcreation describes a type of translation that is not word-for-word, but is rather the process of adapting a message from one language to another, while maintaining its intent, style, tone, and context. A successfully transcreated message evokes the same emotions and carries the same implications in the target language as it does in the source language. In oral communication, this task is traditionally performed by some interlocutor or interpreter, as when a Spanish-speaking baseball player uses an interpreter to serve as an intermediary when being interviewed in-person by reporters.

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.

The third part of this work will show 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 the “special ingredient” that Arthur introduced which elevated the heroic into the superheroic.

In Part 4, we introduce the transitional figures – the evolutionary relatives along the Arthurian line – and 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.

In Part 5, we see how superhero comic books – like Arthuriana – grapple conceptually and materially with societal norms and interrogate the specific ways in which they address Otherness and Outsidership – key functions of the most significant literary works. 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, and what that all means for the future of the genre.

While this was originally a college thesis, I have endeavored to make my argument accessible to any reader, not just those with advanced degrees in English Literature (those happy few who are, in fact, psyched by literary analysis). And, I'm happy I did. It's about time.

Since I turned this in, superheroes have become an economy unto themselves. They have taken on bigger and more daunting challenges both on the page and off. They have become more representative and more inclusive, and the ways in which their stories are told have influenced films of so many other genres, from fantasy to science fiction to horror. While comic books and graphic novels are now studied seriously for their artistic and sociological merit as a form that captures the post-modern zeitgeist, aside from auteur-driven books like Watchmen, superhero comics are generally not afforded such lofty consideration. While a growing community of scholars has made the argument that superhero comic books should be considered literature, nobody has gone so far as to say that superhero comic books are a form of literature that is a direct inheritor of Arthurian tradition (despite the fact that the fingerprints are hard to miss).

To make that argument, I employ terms and theories spanning the disciplines of literary analysis, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, terms that may at first seem



esoteric or abstract. My hope is that, with the time and care I've taken in its revision and update, that this becomes an educational and compelling read that will be just as valuable for the novice as for the expert. So, I'll start with some basic definitions. For that, I turn to Peter Coogan, a pioneer in comic studies who penned the 2006 book Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre – a cornerstone of my original work without which I would not have found the words to answer the question we need to answer before we accept that King Arthur was the first superhero: What *is* a superhero, anyway?

In Superhero, Coogan gives us a handy checklist for what makes a hero super: MPIC, standing for **M**ission. **P**owers. **I**ntity. **C**ostume/Chevron. He distills this definition from the decision issued by Judge Learned Hand in *Detective v. Bruns*, in which Judge Hand ruled that Fox Comics' superhero Wonder Man, introduced in May of 1939, infringed upon DC's Superman.

**Mission:** “The superhero’s mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda . . . The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and therefore not a hero.”<sup>9</sup>

Take, for example, the two films starring the Incredible Hulk. The first, directed by Ang Lee, is very much a monster movie. It views the Hulk as something to be rid of, something haunting Bruce Banner, something that is the result of his father’s abuse and reckless scientific experimentation outside the bounds of ethical and moral behavior. Roger Ebert, in his review, pegged the film’s core: “It is not so much about a green monster as about two wounded adult children of egomaniacs,” referring to Banner and his love interest Betty Ross (Jennifer

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<sup>9</sup> Coogan, 31

Connelly). “The Hulk,” writes Ebert, “is the least successful element in the film,” and likens him to “his spiritual cousin King Kong.” In the end, the conflict is between Banner (played by Eric Bana) and his father (played by Nick Nolte). The Hulk in this film is a blind force of nature, unleashing fury with little or no regard for innocents. While the CGI – for the time – was quite good, and while Lee’s experimentation with using a comic-book-like split-screen framing format in certain sequences was a notable innovation, the film fell very flat with audiences. Again, from Ebert: “this is a comic book movie for people who wouldn’t be caught dead at a comic book movie.” There is no trace of a discernible prosocial moral mission for this Hulk. Any heroics he performs are unintended consequences of destroying his mad-scientist father.

In contrast, the 2008 “Incredible Hulk” film starring Edward Norton – the second entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe – is deeply concerned with a sort of unwilling heroism. Edward Norton’s Banner wants to get rid of the Hulk because he knows that Betty (Liv Tyler)’s father, Gen. Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross will stop at nothing until he perverts Banner’s gamma research to develop devastating weapons of war. What pushes that into true heroic territory, though, is when Banner selflessly volunteers to sacrifice himself, not knowing for sure if a purported “cure” has done its job. Having worked throughout the film to prevent himself from transforming into the Hulk, Banner realizes that he may be the only one who can stop Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth)’s Abomination, who is rampaging through Harlem. Banner – having undergone what he and Dr. Samuel Sterns (Tim Blake Nelson) thought could be a cure for the Hulk persona – convinces Gen. Ross (William Hurt) to let him fall from the back of a military chopper, hoping he will transform when the adrenaline from the fall triggers a change. His argument: He may not be able to control the Hulk, *per se*, but he can, as he says “aim it.” The

key is that he is not sure if he will actually transform into the Hulk, and he is willing to risk his own demise in order to save the people on the ground.

In later films in which this Hulk appears (played in subsequent entries by Mark Ruffalo), Banner has begun to exercise more and more control over the Hulk, and when Hulk becomes the dominant personality in “Thor: Ragnarok,” we can see that he is not some unthinking brute, but a sensitive soul with a moral and ethical code, primitive though they may be. Beginning in 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame,” we see the emergence of what’s called “Professor Hulk” – a fusion of Banner’s brain and Hulk’s brawn. This Professor Hulk has fully embraced his role as a selfless hero, and it all traces back to that single selfless, prosocial mission-based decision in the 2008 film that rebooted the character.

**Powers:** Extraordinary powers, abilities, or attributes beyond those possessed by common human beings. These are one of the most easily identifiable attributes of superheroes: Superman’s heat vision, Arctic breath, strength, flight, and invulnerability; Spider-Man’s ability to stick to walls and sense danger; the enhanced strength, agility, and endurance of Captain America; and the Flash’s astonishing speed, to name a few.

**Identity:** “The identity element comprises the codename and the costume, with the secret identity being a customary counterpart to the codename,” Coogan writes. The codename and costume must “firmly externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or biography” (Coogan, 32). For example: Both Batman’s name and costume represent the fear he strikes in the hearts of criminals by evoking a terrifying creature of the night. The bat is also evocative of his biography: Bruce Wayne encounters a bat while seeking a suitably terrifying disguise. Captain America represents the might and right of the United States, hence his star-spangled costume and shield (a

defensive weapon for a nation seeking to defend the world from fascism). In contrast, early pulp heroes like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro resemble neither a roadside flower nor a fox.

**Costume/Chevron:** This convention grows out of the Identity convention. A superhero must have a costume and/or chevron that emblemize the character's identity. They bear abstract chevrons that become iconic symbols — an abstract distillation of a character's essence. Think Superman's S shield (which has come to mean "hope" in Kryptonian), Batman's chest mark, the star on Captain America's chest and the A on his forehead, the spider on Spider-Man's chest and back, the X-Men's X, the Fantastic Four's '4,' the Punisher's skull, or the Flash's bolt of lightning, which denotes not only his speed, but the origin of his powers. The costume and chevron embody Scott McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification," as stated in his 1993 book Understanding Comics.<sup>10</sup> They are, in a word, iconic.

MPIC is a key convention throughout reading this work, and I will introduce others as we move through the argument. For now, it will be useful to keep in mind also that a text (the actual, physical words on a page) is different from a Text (the much larger body of work concerning a certain subject, akin to what worldbuilders call "lore"), which is different from a work (i.e. a single unit of creative output, like a single movie, a single book, a single issue of a comic book, a single graphic novel, a single essay, a single play, and the like).

And now, with all of these handy distinctions and definitions packed securely in our utility belt, we are ready to begin our quest. To go a bit off-theme, I'll tip my hat to Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka: Come with me and you'll be / In a world of pure imagination. / Take a look and you'll see / Into your imagination."

So, c'mon everybody, here we go!<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Scott McCloud. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993. pp. 30

<sup>11</sup> Disney, Walt. Perf: Bobby Driscoll. *Peter Pan*. RKO Radio Pictures, 1953.

## **Part 1: A Second Glance**

I remember, when you were down  
And you needed a helping hand  
I came to feed you  
But now that I need you  
You won't give me a second glance

—The Kinks, *Catch Me Now I'm Falling*

***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**

I'm not the son of some Roman god but anyway  
 I think I'm gonna be okay

**– Ookla the Mok, *Secret Origin***

Citing Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel, author Peter Coogan — who wrote the foundational Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (2006) — locates the origins of modern superheroes in the stories of Samson and Hercules. Of Superman, Siegel said: “I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one.” While not all scholarship explicitly cites that particular quote, it has indeed flowed from it. If Siegel himself said those were his inspirations, who are we to argue? It certainly makes sense. Superhuman strength? Check. Supernatural stamina and agility? Check. Facing improbable odds, defying fate, and tangling with various beasts, monsters, and ne'er-do-wells? Check, check, and check. There's just one small problem: Time.

The Samson story, featuring an Israelite strongman who shares his Greek counterpart's love for food and drink, dates back to the Deuteronomistic histories of the Hebrew Bible, which were written around the time of the Israelite monarchy (approximately 1,000 B.C.E.). Tales of Hercules (or Heracles) date back at least to the seventh or eighth century B.C.E., when the character of Achilles in Homer's Iliad references the Greek demigod. Given the context and relative brevity of the mention, it is evident that the stories and traditions surrounding Hercules do not need to be elaborated upon (for instance, when one person admonishes another for trying to be and do everything, or lift heavy objects, by saying, “Don't try to be Superman,” the admonisher does not have to explain who Superman is). That indicates that the stories and oral

traditions of Hercules are in fact much older, originating around 3,000 years ago.<sup>12</sup> These heroic figures (not heroes, mind you, but heroic *figures*), constitute the earliest antecedents of superheroes. As Coogan writes: “These mythological and legendary heroes provide the deep background, roots, and prototypes for the superhero.” However, the fossil record – so to speak – linking them to modern superheroes is incomplete and full of holes.

With comics all but *verboten* to academics for the majority of their (short) history, it’s no surprise that the body of scholarship concerned with filling in those holes – with understanding how these primordial figures evolved into superheroes – is somewhat limited. Most contemporary scholarship is focused on modern and postmodern superheroes, and what they say (or don’t) about our world, culture, and society. But to understand where we are going, we must first understand where we’ve been – why certain superheroes remain so elemental, so indelibly written on the public consciousness. Coogan took the first steps toward this and made the most significant inroads, citing the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro as the first of what we would consider the modern masked vigilante – more than a prototype, but not quite the fully-formed production model ... a proto-superhero, if you will – an intermediate step between Samson and Superman, predating the likes of The Shadow, Doc Samson, The Phantom, Flash Gordon, and the other mystery men of the 1930s.

The Scarlet Pimpernel first appeared on the stage on October 15, 1903, and appeared in his own novel shortly thereafter. Zorro, a character created by Johnston McCully for a serial pulp magazine, first appeared in 1919. He was depicted as a type of Californian Robin Hood, “championing peasants oppressed by a corrupt government.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Herakles Undying: A Look at Herakles in Cult. Ed. Dr. Andrea Deagon. December 2000. University of North Carolina, Wilmington. 28 Apr. 2008 < <http://people.uncw.edu/deagona/herakles/cultmain.htm> >.

<sup>13</sup> Evangelista, Nick. The Encyclopedia of the Sword. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995. pp. 637

Indeed, like those characters, many superheroes wear masks to hide secret identities and are mission-driven: righting wrongs, protecting the downtrodden, defending those on the margins, acting as vigilantes, meting out justice, and filling societal roles left vacant or abandoned by inept, corrupt, overwhelmed or undermanned authorities. However, neither Zorro nor the Scarlet Pimpernel nor the pulp mystery men who came on their heels had such a broad and enduring appeal as the later costumed characters who emerged – Superman, Batman, The Flash, Wonder Woman, The Green Lantern, Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Spider-Man, and so on.

Why? The likes of Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Flash Gordon, The Shadow, Doc Savage, and The Phantom operated in spheres of action that were either too hyper-local to have broad appeal or so abstract and remote that it created a similar distance from the reader's experience – The Phantom on the high seas and jungles of Bengala, Flash Gordon in outer space, Doc Savage on globe-trotting adventures to exotic locales thanks to his unparalleled resources. In superheroes, readers could see a version of themselves, their circumstances, and their aspirations all set in the locales similar to their everyday lives. While Gotham and Metropolis were fictional, they were analogues for New York City; and the earliest Marvel heroes were explicitly grounded in the Big Apple, with the bases of operations for many Marvel heroes located mere blocks from the real-world offices in which they were drawn.

These specific facets of the superheroic character are the source of their real-world power and influence, but where in the family tree do they come from? There was some understood universality underlying superheroes, but not the likes of Zorro, Doc Savage, et al. There was some literary gene, some super-chromosome that those other masked vigilantes – those mystery men – simply lacked. They descended from a common ancestor, yes, but their species had long



since diverged from the line that produced Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Spider-Man.

This was the question that consumed me as a young man perusing the weekly selections at my local comic store, as I watched fantastic artistic period movies on The Shadow and The Phantom entertain but ultimately sputter at the box office. Then came Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy from Sony, and the Bryan Singer X-Men movies from Fox. One could argue that better scripts and better effects helped those films reach a new level, but there was something more intangible, something just out of reach, something that superheroes gained during those 3,000 years that set them apart.

Superhero comic books are a new mythology. They emerge from the same place as the folktales like those that birthed Hercules, Samson, Achilles, but they have become something more. Coogan touched on it in his book, writing of these early heroes (emphasis my own):  
 “Sometimes they offer immediate inspiration to the creators, as with Samson ... **other times, they merely serve as a version of the “collective unconscious”—the background we all carry with us because of the way characters, motifs, and plot dynamics provide the models of character and narrative that authors draw on intentionally or unintentionally.**”

These early heroic characters were generally amoral strongmen, operating without a staunch moral code backing a broadly pro-social mission. They were hyper-local and very much of-their-time.

There had to be something special, some revolutionary, extraordinary tradition that had emerged in those intervening centuries that superheroes tapped into, a tradition that – I theorized – bridged high culture and popular culture and transcends them both. Like the primordial heroes of old, there had to be a story so elemental, so universal, so much a part of what Coogan called

the “collective unconscious” that it was told everywhere – around campfires, in leather-bound tomes, and on the silver screen. There was someone else. There was something else.

That ‘something’ is the Figure of King Arthur, which in its form, its function, its means of production, its social authorship, its origins, and the moral content of its tales, is the first of what we today call a superhero. Like no other literary tradition before or since, the figure of King Arthur has shaped the very manner in which comic book superheroes are presented; how their stories are produced; the way they are marketed; and how they are thought of, discussed, created, constructed, and considered.

Because of King Arthur – himself rooted in oral folk tradition – superhero comic books became something *more*. Like Arthur, they are continually reconsidered, renegotiated, and rewritten, with fresh, new works and interpretations continually produced from a myriad of diverse and non-traditional points of view. Like Arthur, their Text resists definition, and they live as much in the air around us as they do on the glossy pages of their monthly installments. There is an ephemera that surrounds them: common cultural currency, things that people “just know” without ever having read a single page (refer to the aforementioned example of “Don’t try to be Superman”).

This serves to answer yet another important question: Why should we care? If you, Dear Reader, accept the conclusion that Arthur is that missing link — be it as a character or as a body of literature or “lore” — then what does that matter to how we read comic books today? Positing that filial relationship puts the modern and the medieval in real dialogue in a novel way for the very first time, making medieval literature relevant to modern literary scholars and not just historians. By putting medieval literature in conversation with modern and postmodern literature, we open up an era that has largely been relegated to the fringes of academia to modern

reinterpretation and reconsideration on a much broader scale. It also allows us to read superhero comics with a more serious and literary eye, to consider them as legitimate forms of literature. Most exciting of all: The similarities between Arthuriana and modern comic book superheroes — in their modes of production and in the way they function they serve in the larger, global society — suggest a novel new theory of historical transmission.

## ***Chapter 2: Putting Away Childish Things***

### **Dr. Frederic Wertham and the Dismissal of Comic Books**

“When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”

**— C. S. Lewis**

Why superheroes? Why, 70 years after Superman first leaped into action, are comic book superhero stories arguably more popular than ever? Why do they generate such absurdly high box office receipts? Why are studios banking entire summers on do-gooders in tights (or black leather)? It could be that movie-making technology has finally caught up to the impossible splash-page action sequences that would have been impossible to film even just 30 years ago. It could be the fact that the superhero genre is comfortable, a place where consumers from all walks of life and all levels of society have already been conditioned to suspend disbelief. It could be — as theorized by many academics attempting to uncover the reason for the popularity of the recent comic book superhero boom — any number of complicated, obtuse, and nuanced reasons. Or it could be something as simple as the fact that, with the majority of comic book superheroes, we’ve seen these stories before. Yes, ‘before’ in the surface sense — people buying movie tickets now had likely read comic books when they were children — but more fundamentally, ‘before’ in the larger, historical sense. Perhaps the same world that is lapping up comic book superhero stories at the multiplex now is doing so because we’ve seen these same stories before, albeit in an attire wholly different from tights and capes.

For much of their existence, that fleeting sense of déjà vu has gone largely unexplored by the literary community. Little serious academic consideration — to say nothing of serious literary analysis — has been given to superhero comic books. They’re the funny pages — their very

name implying frivolity, disposability, and fleeting fancy. They are the stuff of childhood, the physical manifestation of nostalgia. Like baseball cards wedged into bicycle spokes, drinking water from the garden hose, and skinned knees, they are the things we grow out of, the things we are supposed to leave behind. “When I became a man,” Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:11-12, “I put away childish things.”

In the late 1980s, Gertrude Himmelfarb, a noted champion of conservative cultural norms, derided those who argued for a reconsideration of the Western cultural canon, and coding those who did as immature by saying they considered “[c]omic books ... as properly a part of the curriculum as *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*.”

In February 1988, William Bennett – Himmelfarb’s ideological contemporary and Ronald Reagan’s former Secretary of Education — bemoaned that same burgeoning support for reconsidering the cultural canon in a speech before 400 university presidents and deans. He accused faculty of “trashing Plato and Shakespeare,”<sup>14</sup> in an effort to include previously-ignored alternative voices and nontraditional sources. This theory of literary study known as deconstruction was labeled by Pulitzer Prize-winning Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer as the greatest threat to American democracy in a post-Soviet world. Himmelfarb argued that it was “reasonable and proper to ask students, even scholars, . . . to accept, at least provisionally, until disproved by powerful evidence, the judgment of posterity about great writers and great books.” To even consider the inclusion of anything else in the Western cultural canon was to wade into a “swamp ... ready to devour anything,” said American art critic Roger Kimball. To reconsider, reassess, or question the wisdom of those who shaped the canon would be, as Bennett said, tantamount to “curricular debasement.”

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence W. Levine. Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. pp. 253

Himmelfarb, in her invective against the reconsideration of Western cultural canon, specifically lamented that, for her ideological opponents, “Superman is as worthy of study as Shakespeare.” Why was Superman seen as such a threat to the established order, on par with acknowledging the legitimacy of LGBTQIA+ narratives, Native American stories, narratives discussing female sexuality from a female point of view, or novels written by former slaves or manifestos written by modern dissidents?

Comic books were far from “childish things.” They had been widely read by soldiers on the front lines of World War II, serving as morale-boosting propaganda during the Allied march on Fortress Europe. They were read by a generation of young men coming of age in the middle of a bloody battle against history’s greatest evil. And yet, less than 10 years after the end of the war — less than 20 years after their advent — they had become labeled as the lowest kind of popular tripe. Dr. Frederic Wertham’s Seduction of the Innocent (Rinehart & Co., 1954) tied comic books in general to juvenile delinquency, and superheroes in particular to fascism, mental illness, and sexual deviancy. He coined the term “Superman complex,” claiming that children who read comics were exposed to “fantasies of sadistic joy in seeing other people punished over and over again while you yourself remain immune.” That kind of thinking could endanger children, Dr. Wertham argued, and not just by giving children a false sense of physical or legal invulnerability. Dr. Wertham wrote:

The Superman type of comic books tends to force and super-force. Dr. Paul A. Witty, professor of education at Northwestern University, has well described these comics when he said that they “present our world in a kind of Fascist setting of violence and hate and destruction. I think it is bad for children,” he goes on, “to get that kind of recurring diet ... [they] place too much emphasis on a Fascist society. Therefore the democratic ideals that we should seek are likely to be overlooked.”

Actually, Superman (with the big S on his uniform — we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an SS) needs an endless stream of ever new submen,

criminals and "foreign-looking" people not only to justify his existence but even to make it possible.<sup>15</sup>

While Wertham's methodology has since been thoroughly discredited<sup>16</sup> and his conclusions denounced as falsities based on manipulated or outright fabricated evidence, his message found a willing audience because of the era in which he wrote. With the rise of Soviet Russia and Communism in the aftermath of World War II, the first stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement afoot, and the paranoia of McCarthyism gripping the United States, his book traded on fear — the fear that through some insidious and seditious subterfuge, some disembodied "they" would take over "us" from the inside out, polluting the minds of our most fragile citizens: children.<sup>17</sup>

Wertham's book had its desired effect, firmly relegating comics to the unseemly lowest rungs of popular culture, far beneath any serious consideration as a legitimate art form worthy of analysis and inquiry. A mass-produced, disposable form of cheap entertainment for children, superhero comics were foolish flotsam that, in being so below the radar of suspicion, could put dangerous ideas into the heads of the impressionable, uneducated, and immature.<sup>18</sup> Until Wertham, young people and those marginalized groups with little means could access the kinds of challenging ideas and horizon-expanding adventures they would otherwise be unable to afford in the form of books and theater. So, the cultural value of comics and superheroes were diminished, their readers infantilized, and their subversive messages muzzled.

In response to the Senate hearings resulting from Wertham's book, the Comics Magazine Association of America — the comic publishers — established a self-censorship body, the

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<sup>15</sup> Wertham, Fredric (1954). Seduction of the Innocent. Rinehart & Company. pp. 192, 234–235.

<sup>16</sup> Tilley, Carol L. (2012). "[Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics](#)". *Information & Culture: A Journal of History*. 47 (4)

<sup>17</sup> 1956's "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" is a particularly evocative dramatization and critique of this kind of groupthink.

<sup>18</sup> 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](http://www.vox.com/2014/12/15/7326605/comic-book-censorship). Accessed 7 Mar. 2024.

Comics Code Authority, hoping to stay in business. The code they adopted on October 26, 1954 forbids, among other things: stories that create sympathy for criminals; stories that promote “distrust of the forces of law and justice”; scenes of “excessive violence,” “brutal torture,” “excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime”; the crime of kidnapping; criminals escaping punishment; and scenes of “depravity, lust, sadism, masochism.” It dictates that “special precautions” should be taken to avoid referencing those with “physical afflictions or deformities,” and that all stories dealing with evil shall be used only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue. It forbids ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group. It decreed that seduction and rape “shall never be shown or suggested,” and that “the treatment of live-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.”

The ideas of justified crime; corrupt or immoral authority figures, officials, or clergy; living with illness, disease, or physical limitations; discrimination and violent repression; use of traditional power structures for nefarious means; non-traditional family structures — these were all out of bounds. Comics were, in essence, neutered as a form of participatory literature reflective of their surrounding culture. And, while, yes, the vast majority of Golden Age superheroes were white, cis, Christian men, their creators were far more diverse, and trafficked in big ideas such as these, ideas that could upend the established power structures in a nation at an inflection point.

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.”<sup>19</sup> That is precisely why, in

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<sup>19</sup> Abad-Santos.



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. It is no wonder, then, that the specter of the inclusion of Superman — the champion of “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” — in serious academic settings was the source of such incredulity from Himmelfarb and other guardians of the Western literary canon. Superhero comics had, by then, become a casualty of the bifurcation in the study of American literature that emerged in the late 19th century, an attitude that enabled the diminution of certain forms of literature while elevating others to a level of privilege and prestige.

### ***Chapter 3: Barred from the Bard***

#### **High Culture, Low Culture, and the Curious Case of Shakespeare's Disappearance**

“Doth Mother know you wear-eth her drapes?”<sup>20</sup>

#### **– Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) in “The Avengers”**

To understand why there existed such literary segregation in the United States for Wertham to weaponize, we must understand the context in which it first crystalized.

As early as 1810, there emerged a movement in American literary study that sought to diminish the importance of popular or “low” culture — typed by actor, poet, playwright, and author John Howard Payne as cultural works catering to the “idle, profligate, and vulgar” — in favor of Victorian “high” culture. Only literature deemed truly exceptional was of such considerable merit, refinement, and value so as to be worthy of serious study and consideration by the high-minded elite. It was against this backdrop that an author who had enjoyed widespread, crossover appeal at every level of American society — one of the most ubiquitous authors in America since even before its founding — all but disappeared from American popular culture.

Featuring unflattering portrayals of criminal, insane, or inept monarchies in many of his plays, it's easy to see why one William Shakespeare was wildly popular in colonial and post-Revolutionary America. His plays subverted expectations and power structures alike.

Throughout his body of work, Shakespeare masks often cutting social and political commentary and satire behind slapstick, lurid and bawdy humor, crude jokes, and burlesque. His hallmark

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<sup>20</sup> During the first act of the seminal superhero film “The Avengers” (2012), Tony Stark/Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) first encounters Thor (Chris Hemsworth), while the latter is trying to return his itinerant adoptive brother Loki to Asgardian custody. Stark prefaces this quoted query by addressing Thor (who, in the comic books, speaks in Shakespearian “Olde” English) as “Shakespeare in the Park.” Meant to be a cutting jab, the sobriquet refers to the effort — founded by Joseph Papp in 1954 in New York’s Central Park — to make theater available to all walks of life by putting on productions of Shakespeare in an outdoor public venue, in essence reclaiming Shakespeare for the people. This democratization of Shakespeare has fittingly spread across the world, spanning the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, and the British Isles.

double entendres and word play were written primarily for the benefit of the common folk who occupied the most inexpensive real estate inside Shakespeare's Globe Theater — the groundlings.<sup>21</sup> Unlike today, the 'cheap seats' in Shakespeare's time were actually those closest to the action, affording those on the lowest rungs of society a somewhat privileged and interactive relationship with both the actors and the text. That democratic DNA is what allowed Shakespeare's plays to find purchase in fertile cultural soil across the Atlantic more than a century after his death, where his plays were performed by presidents and soldiers<sup>22</sup> alike, in venues as provincial as frontier towns and river ports. James Fenimore Cooper in fact declared the Bard as "the great author of America" in his 1828 book Notions of The Americans.<sup>23</sup> French political philosopher and historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s: "There is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of Henry V for the first time in a log cabin."

Yet, as the United States edged closer and closer to Civil War, fewer and fewer theaters showing Shakespeare plays were open to the very type of so-called rabble for whom they were written. More and more businessmen who managed large theater chains stopped showing Shakespeare because they saw an "unbridgeable gulf" that separated "tastes and predilections of the various socioeconomic groups."

The decline in Shakespeare's ubiquity in American popular culture happened to occur at the same historical moment as the first all-African-American performances of his works in 1821.<sup>24</sup> In fact, when the first all-African-American theater troupe moved to the famously-white

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<sup>21</sup> The term "groundlings" originated in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II: "... to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise." In what may be called a fourth-wall break today, Shakespeare surely wrote this line (as he did many others) as a knowing poke at the largest and most vocal proportion of a play's audience, who would have likely responded to such jocularly (albeit at their own expense) with laughter and glee.

<sup>22</sup> Ebershoff, David. "Bard in the USA." *Columbia Magazine*, 1 Oct. 2014, pp. 60-61.

<sup>23</sup> 1828 Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey edition, 148-49

<sup>24</sup> African-American playwright William Henry Brown founded the first recorded Black theater troupe in America when he started The African Company in New York City. James Hewlett became the first African-American Shakespearean actor when

Park Theater in New York City, the theater's manager hoped to put an end to the company by staging a riot. That, I argue, is no coincidence.

What Shakespeare had once represented to a nascent America — a democratic rebelliousness, aspiration, the subversion of authority — was now too dangerous to be left to anyone but the elite guardians of so-called “high culture,” guardians who were overwhelmingly Protestant, wealthy, white (specifically Anglo-Saxon), and male. The canon these guardians constructed — starting with Shakespeare — became a bulwark against foreign (read: Eastern European immigrants of the late 19th century) and unrefined (read: African American) influences on American culture. Or, as Payne would put it, the “idle, profligate, and vulgar.”

Lawrence Levine, who radically posited the reconsideration of a stable literary and cultural canon in his 1990 work, Highbrow/Lowbrow, eloquently remarked that

“if there is a tragedy in this development, it is not only that millions of Americans were now separated from exposure to such creators as Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Verdi, whom they had enjoyed in various formats for much of the nineteenth century, but also that rigid cultural categories, once they were in place, made it so difficult for so long for so many to understand the value and importance of the popular forms around them.”<sup>25</sup>

The so-called cultural elite, Levine asserted, had lost their “ability to discriminate independently, to sort things out for themselves and understand that simply because a form of expressive culture was widely accessible and highly popular it was not therefore necessarily devoid of any redeeming value or artistic merit” (Levine, 232).

“An important element of genre, and of popular culture generally,” Coogan writes, “is imitation and repetition,” something that is integral to folk stories and folk culture — its how legend and myth are spread and iterated. High culture, instead, “values originality and individual

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he took on the title role in the company's first production of *Richard III*. When the company moved into the Park Theater — a famously white institution — its manager started a riot hoping to put an end to the company.

<sup>25</sup>Levine, pp. 232.

works that cannot be easily imitated,” (Coogan 28) which would seem to preclude the inclusion of such folk-created mythology. Given the status that Classical mythology and Arthuriana enjoy in high culture, it’s hard to ignore the contradiction, unless one accounts for how the convention has been selectively applied.

In their construction of the false dichotomy of high and low culture, the cultural elite have been able to cloister the selected works of art behind artificial social and economic barriers. There, those works can be divorced from their historical context, protected from any unsanctioned iterative evolution, and have their uncomfortable edges blunted.

The new hierarchy would be weaponized against potentially subversive literature in one of two ways: Elevating otherwise-palpable work with dangerous ideas by established Masters above the level of participatory public discourse; or diminishing the widely-popular work of the Others so much so that consuming it becomes a mark of unseriousness, immaturity, and shame.

Exhibit A: Shakespeare — a favorite of Queen Elizabeth and King James — was from a monied upper-middle-class English Protestant family. He was not an “undesirable” (though, ironically, stage actors had long been considered members of the lower classes), so his ribaldry, tawdriness, incisive commentary, and deft satire could be excused, sanitized, and sterilized by figuratively sealing it behind museum glass, where it would be protected from the dangerous fingerprints of the common folk for whom it was initially made and from whom it drew its timeless popularity. Thus, Shakespeare’s works could be safely observed and studied only by those permitted to do so. Consider the fact that the aforementioned manager of the Park Theater attempted to stage a riot that could destroy his own property rather than allow African-Americans to access and interpret “high” culture.

Exhibit B: Superhero comic books — their creative ranks “a refuge of [i]mmigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts” — had to be delegitimized and their readers infantilized to keep the established cultural order and power structures in place.

High culture and low “popular” culture: N’er the twain shall meet. And, while many of the fortifications of this artifice have been disassembled across all art forms, that has not happened until very recently.

Film, for example, is a relatively new medium where success and longevity are almost completely predicated on popularity (i.e. box office receipts), and as such, it has a much broader (and more modern) definition of what works and genres rise to the level of academic discourse. And yet, we can still see vestiges of those old artifices today, not unlike the foundations of Hadrian’s Wall in northern Britain (that’s an Easter Egg for you students of Arthur’s historicity). It was not until 2018 that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences — alarmed by plummeting ratings for its Academy Awards telecasts; acutely aware of its predominantly old, white, and male voting membership; and acknowledging its fading relevancy — deigned to add a new award category: Academy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Popular Film.<sup>26</sup>

While many veteran entertainment journalists and Academy members decried the move as pandering to the modern blockbuster,<sup>27 28 29</sup> Sam Adams of *Slate* made a poignant observation: The frontrunner for the inaugural award was Marvel superhero film “Black Panther,” a film with a predominantly African-American cast, an African-American director, an African-American

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<sup>26</sup> Desta, Yohana (November 13, 2018). ["The Best-Popular-Film Oscar Was an Attempt to Save Ratings, Academy President Confirms"](#). *Vanity Fair*. [Archived](#) from the original on November 29, 2018. Retrieved November 19, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Zacharek, Stephanie (August 8, 2018). ["The Oscars' New 'Popular Film' Category Confirms That Hollywood Thinks We're Stupid"](#). *Time*. [Archived](#) from the original on August 9, 2018. Retrieved October 22, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Buchanan, Kyle (August 8, 2018). ["The Oscars Made Some Dumb Decisions Today"](#). *Vulture*. [Archived](#) from the original on August 28, 2018. Retrieved October 22, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Robey, Tim (August 9, 2018). ["The new 'Best Hit' Oscar makes the Academy look desperate, patronising and more out of touch than ever"](#). *The Telegraph*. [ISSN 0307-1235](#). [Archived](#) from the original on August 14, 2018. Retrieved August 14, 2018.

star, and a deep resonance with African-American culture. The film told the story of a prince who had to win the hearts and minds of a fractured nation, unite disparate tribes, protect them from a foreign threat, and then share their advanced scientific understanding and technology throughout the world – a reflection of both Arthurian and Alexandrian narratives. And yet, Adams wrote, “if the category is instituted in time and *Black Panther* wins, it will be hard to see it as anything but a second-class victory—the “separate but equal”<sup>30</sup> of Best Picture trophies.”<sup>31</sup> The category was not instituted that year.<sup>32</sup> Instead, “Black Panther” was nominated for Best Picture, but lost out to “Green Book,” a film many labeled as trafficking in the problematic “White Savior” or “Magical Negro” tropes.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A phrase referring to the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 in which the United States Supreme Court legitimized racial segregation laws, so long as facilities for each race were “separate but equal.” That doctrine was found to be not applicable to public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the first in a series of decisions that have *de facto* overruled the *Plessy* decision in its entirety.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, Sam (August 9, 2018). “*The Oscars Are Justly Proud of Their Newly Diverse Membership. Why Don’t They Trust It?*”. *Slate*.

<https://slate.com/culture/2018/08/the-oscars-new-best-popular-film-category-is-an-insult-to-its-newly-diverse-membership.html>. Retrieved March 19, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> In a similar move, the Academy had instituted a “Best Animated Film” award in 2001, to accommodate the rise of computer-animated feature films. The Academy had previously bestowed special Oscars for “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” (1938), animated/live-action hybrid “Who Framed Roger Rabbit” (1989), and “Toy Story” (1996), but only one animated film had ever been nominated for Best Picture (1991’s “Beauty and the Beast”). The same year the Academy announced and then scrapped the Popular Film award, the universally-acclaimed “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,” a film focused on Miles Morales — the Spider-Man of Marvel’s Ultimate universe, a teenager with an African-American father and a Puerto Rican mother — won Best Animated Film, rather than being nominated for Best Picture.

<sup>33</sup> Chow, Andrew R. (February 13, 2019). “What to Know About the Controversy Surrounding the Movie *Green Book*”. <https://time.com/5527806/green-book-movie-controversy/>. Retrieved March 19, 2024.

## ***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**

We are the cartoon heroes, oh whoa  
We are the ones who're gonna last forever  
We came out of a crazy mind, oh whoa  
And walked out on a piece of paper

#### **– Aqua, *Cartoon Heroes***

Allan Bloom, in his bestseller, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students (1987), remarked on the shrinking community of the truly cultured that “the real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, true friends.” Bloom specifically critiques the “addiction to [pop] music” and the devaluation of the great books of the Western canon as a source of wisdom, and contends that such devaluation has greatly hobbled students’ ability to think critically about or address current events. He concludes that the cumulative effects of such trends make it “very difficult for [students] to have a passionate relationship with the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education, [since] [i]t only artificially induces the exaltation attached to the completion of the greatest endeavors ... like discovery of the truth.”<sup>34</sup>

In fact, those like Bloom, who restricted themselves to those like-minded “few, true friends,” restricted themselves to such a narrow and static view of art and literature — that which prized only the products of “high culture” — that they lost more than they gained. They sacrificed the raw authentic in favor of sanitized constructs.

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<sup>34</sup> Bloom, Allan. The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 68-80



Chief in the hierarchical perception of “low” culture as it relates to “high” culture is the assumption that works of so-called “folk” art and literature are primitive, juvenile, and unrefined. In his essay “Thick Description” — the first in his 1973 book The Interpretation of Cultures — anthropologist Clifford Geertz rails against this retrograde coding, arguing that the folk anecdotes that populate his field notes are just as valuable, just as culturally interrogative, just as valid as other, more traditional literary forms, if not more so.<sup>35</sup>

Traditional literary works, to Geertz, provide a kind of false sense of what folk stories inherently possess: what he calls thick — or layered — description of the real world. For instance: British philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s hypothetical description of a wink gains its layers of meaning not from authentic, intrinsic intent of the action in question, but because it is *constructed* as having such layers (i.e. the distinction between a wink and a twitch, or between these and a parody of a wink or even the rehearsal of the parodic wink). In “Thick Description,” Geertz remarks of this exercise that “all this winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking, may seem a bit artificial” (“Thick Description,” 7).

The best way to analyze cultures, Geertz asserts, is by understanding their folk stories, because just as the stories act out the culture from which they spring, “culture itself is an “acted document”” (“Thick Description,” 10). There is a dialogue between culture and story, one in which each equally influences the other. The quotes that Geertz gathers in his field notes — such as that told to him by a Moroccan man relating an incident of sheep stealing and the resultant, requisite justice being meted out — are not merely anecdotes, but are, themselves, part of literary Texts. They negotiate the values, anxieties, trauma, and ethics of their originating culture through (often performative) narrative and therefore participate in the same crucial functions of literature

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<sup>35</sup> His assertions are very much in the vein of those made by Roland Barthes in his distinctions between a Work and a Text, which will be discussed later.

as the vaunted works of the Western cultural canon. In his analysis of Geertz, American literary historian and writer Stephen Greenblatt concludes that cultural gatekeepers' own "insistence on narrative and on textuality helps to justify the appeal to techniques of literary analysis," when considering these folk stories.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than limiting the application of literary criticism and interpretation solely to texts deemed worthy by the established cultural elite, Geertz argues for the interpretive strategies of literary criticism to be applied to the same "complex symbolic systems and life patterns" studied by anthropologists, systems and patterns that are borne out in folk narratives. In doing so, we would invite literary criticism to make contact with an authentic cultural reality uniquely related by folk narratives because, unlike Ryle's example, "the intentions and circumstances [of these folk narratives] are not securely situated on the outside of the actions reported" (Greenblatt, 25). Folk tales and other such works of "low culture," relate to and touch reality in this way precisely because they are *not* constructed. They possess an inherent, intrinsic, innate authenticity, serving as windows into culture and society, and come to "possess within themselves more and more of the culture's linked intentions" ("Touch of the Real," 5). Distinct from Ryle's "artificial" stories, the folk stories that Geertz relates are "quoted raw." It is the fact that they "arouse bafflement, the intense curiosity and interest, that necessitates the interpretation of cultures" through the tools of literary analysis ("Touch of the Real," 2).

While many traditional literary works are lauded for showing alternative points of view, much of what is considered part of the English literary canon features "sweeping politically focused narratives that once supposedly gave us a sense of the unified whole, although in fact they focused overwhelmingly upon a decided minority of the population in terms of class, ethnicity, region, and gender" (Levine, 79), that minority being the privileged elite. Students

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<sup>36</sup>Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Touch of the Real." *Representations*, no. 59, 1997, pp. 3

have been discouraged from “tampering with the canon” and told to confine their abundant energies to the “short list” of works considered “worthy,” as opposed to exploring greater alternative Texts. Not only do these alternative Texts grant access to an American past, as Levine asserts, but in the case of King Arthur and comic book superheroes, they grant access to a shared *human* past.

Like the works of Shakespeare (many of which use such sacralized Arthurian sources as Geoffrey of Monmouth), the earliest stories of King Arthur — those that came to form the core elements of his narrative such as his parentage, Merlin, Excalibur, and Queen Guinevere — bore the authentic marks of what would later be glossed as the “low” cultures from which they emerged. Arthur’s stories were originally told in much the same raw, anecdotal way as the quotes Geertz gathered in his field notes from Bali, Indonesia, Morocco, and Sumatra. In fact, if one analyzes (as we soon will) the works of Arthurian Text closest to its historical origin — the stories that emerged from the “savage” cultures of the native Britons — much can be learned about the values, ethics, legends, creation myths, religions, belief systems, and philosophies of the unique cultures that birthed it: the Celts, Picts, and Welsh. It then follows that, by analyzing how those elements and the larger Text were redacted over the centuries, we can learn about the cultural anxieties and political climate of the cultures that did the redacting.

To whit: Over the centuries, the cultures in which Arthur’s stories originated came to be Othered by those redactors — among them the conquering Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and their successors — so much so that they came to be coded as dark-skinned by contemporary writers. The folk elements central to Arthurian lore were renegotiated – sanitized, appropriated or stripped away altogether – just in time for Arthur to anchor the English literary canon as it came to coalesce.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Levine, 79

Arthur arose from an oral folk tradition of cultural memory that was elevated to legend, a legend which was in turn elevated to mythology. And yet, in the abrogation of the Arthurian Text from folk to popular “low” to “high” culture, it – like Shakespeare in 19th century America – became dissociated from its historical and cultural memory and divorced from its original cultural and temporal context. The case of Shakespeare shows that this process has the potential to strip the folk-origin art of its potency and efficacy as social commentary or critique. One suspects that this is a feature, rather than a bug, because in refusing to acknowledge the folk, “low” or “popular” culture origins of works like Shakespeare and Arthur, the arbiters of culture preclude the possibility of expanding the accepted canon to other, less traditional works with similar origins and thus similarly subversive potential.

The tragedy in this is that there is so much more literature to which students can be exposed — literature that speaks to them, like the pop music Bloom so despised — than that to which they are generally exposed in the course of their secondary education or undergrad survey courses. To quote Shakespeare himself, “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>38</sup> There is, as Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury told Tony Stark in the post-credits scene of “Iron Man” (2008), “a bigger universe” of literature out there.

Levine laments the fact that, because of this false dichotomy of “low” and “high” culture, “historians are told that they should diminish, if not abandon, their studies of that multiplicity of ethnic minorities, workers, immigrants, and women, about whose culture and role we still have so much to learn if we are to truly comprehend the American past” (Levine, 79).

Superhero comics, as acted culture, recall that past in the same raw, authentic manner in which both Geertz’s quotes *and* heroic stories like Arthur’s used to be told, retold, and

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<sup>38</sup> Hamlet, 1.5.165–66

reinterpreted, before they became bound (and gagged) and glossed in Penguin Classics or Norton's Anthology.

Consider the case of Superman, which, when taken as a body of work, is unquestionably an immigrant Text, originating from the minds of two children of European Jewish immigrants. In the midst of the Depression, with the persistent undercurrent of American bigotry gaining an increasingly antisemitic flavor and increasingly entrenched economic stratification at home; the looming specter of a second world war and rumors of horrors unthinkable even for such a historically oppressed people abroad, Superman's first villains were landlords, corrupt politicians, and domestic abusers — anyone who used their strength to prey on the weak. His very name — Superman — is an English translation of German philosopher Frederic Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, and yet, instead of looking like a vision of Aryan perfection, he has the dark hair and light eyes of Eastern European Jews. Superman — and therefore all the heroes he inspired — are inextricably linked to that history, that generational trauma, that crucial context. They are invariably Texts of Outsidership – of Otherness and ostracism – and yet, they are also aspirational Texts of hope and societal change — the same kind of thematic complexity and nuance found in canonized works hailed as traditional literary masterpieces. And yet, in a nation defined by its multi-ethnic character, for which its historical tradition of immigration had been a point of pride, these very Texts of those immigrants and marginalized groups were ignored in favor of some constructed, inherited, Western European notion of “high” culture.

Although superhero comics became the “childish things” which the arbiters of high culture – such as Himmelfarb, Bennett, Payne, and Dr. Wertham – urged us to put away, their natural tendency to work out cultural anxieties – a function inherent in works of popular or folk culture – still found ways to comment on social issues despite —the restrictions of the Comics

Code Authority's restrictions. They found ways to become what they were to begin with: a voice for the Other.

Less than 10 years after the CCA went into effect, the Big Two – DC and Marvel Comics – went through a creative boom matched only by the start of the Golden Age. Not only did superhero comic books endure, but they persisted in pushing boundaries, innovating narrative techniques and adding allegorical subtext with a deftness and complexity needed to confound cultural gatekeepers, all thanks to creators who were well versed in the art of subtly resisting and undermining such intellectual tyranny. In the span of four years (1961 to 1964), the two companies came to introduce heroes who today remain the company's most popular, most enduring, and most profitable.

In 1963, DC introduced the Doom Patrol, a collection of misfit heroes whose gifts could just as accurately be labeled curses. Led by a wheelchair-bound and ethically-dubious leader, they included a robot inhabited by the disembodied brain of a racecar driver who suffers from frequent depression and views himself as less than human; a radioactive test pilot depicted as a bandage-wrapped visual twin of the Invisible Man; and a former Hollywood starlet cast out as a freak when she struggled to control the body-altering shapeshifting abilities bestowed upon her through exposure to volcanic gas while filming a movie in Africa. That same year, DC introduced a female equal to Aquaman in Mera – a queen of the mysterious Dimension Aqua to match the king of Atlantis.

In 1964, DC introduced Zatanna, the powerful magical daughter of acclaimed magician superhero John Zatara, a son of Italian immigrants who raised Zatanna as a single father (who made his debut in 1938 in the same Action Comics #1 as Superman). In Zatanna's early

adventures, she battles Batman and Robin, teams with The Atom and Green Lantern, and was featured in storylines edited by one of the luminaries of early comic books, Julius Schwartz.<sup>39</sup>

In 1961, Marvel's *Fantastic Four* suggested that a found family was just as legitimate as one based on traditional familial bonds, normalized the inclusion of the differently-abled (blind love interest Alicia Masters) and the physically malformed in *The Thing*, Benjamin Grimm (who also just happened to be Jewish). It depicted *The Thing* as just as valuable a contributor as his normal-passing teammates, and it was often his alternative perspective that made him the team's moral center.

Debuting in 1962, *The Incredible Hulk* cast the American military-industrial complex in an unflattering light – to say the least – as they pursued Bruce Banner, who in his self sacrifice to save a hapless teenager from being vaporized by an atomic blast, became a victim of the military's obsession with harnessing the destructive power of gamma radiation. Later that same year, *Thor* debuted with the alter ego of a hobbled medical doctor named Donald Blake, who needed a cane to walk. In 1963, Janet Van Dyne – the Wasp – served as one of the founding members of the Avengers, and even gave the team its name.

Upon their debut in 1963, the X-Men became a not-so-thinly-veiled allegory for the dangers of prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination of every sort. In the 1970s, their chief antagonist — Magneto — was given a tragic, layered backstory that made him more than just another mustache-twirling villain: He was a Holocaust survivor whose personal trauma informed

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<sup>39</sup> The Bronx-born Schwartz was the son of Romanian-Jewish immigrants, and went on to become primary editor of DC's flagship superhero titles featuring Batman and Superman. As a literary agent, he represented the likes of Ray Bradbury and H.P. Lovecraft, and organized the first World Science Fiction Convention in 1939. His work in the late 1950s aftermath of the CCA heralded the coming Silver Age of Comics, as his work with Robert Kanigher, Carmine Infantino, and Joe Kubert produced the Barry Allen incarnation of *The Flash*. He also worked with John Broome and Gardner Fox to revive *Green Lantern*, *Hawkman*, and *The Atom*. He conceived of the *Justice League of America* as an update to the *Justice Society*, and introduced them in early 1960, inspiring Stan Lee and Marvel to respond by creating the *Fantastic Four*.

the extreme methods he employed in order to prevent what he foresaw was another impending genocide.

Coming out of an era where teenagers were almost exclusively sidekicks who were routinely and nonchalantly put into dangerous situations by their supposedly-responsible adult superheroes, 15-year-old Peter Parker had agency of his own, and lived by the motto uttered by his late Uncle Ben: “With great power, there must also come great responsibility.” When he debuted as Spider-Man in 1962, he showed that even while navigating the social battlefields of high school and the awkwardness of adolescence, he could still be just as heroic as the adults, if not moreso. His struggles with his powers were a metaphor for puberty, his dual identity an allegory for a teenager’s developing sense of self. Spider-Man showed that young people were not some fragile group that needed protection, but rather that they — and their problems — *mattered*. In other words: These heroes dealt in the icky stuff the CCA forbade — the stuff of great literature — and yet, they were *still* considered the stuff of children, unworthy of consideration as proper literature or social commentary.

The same class of cultural gatekeepers that had elevated Shakespeare’s works to “high” culture to seal them off from popular discourse and interpretation, had enabled the relegation of comics to the realm of juvenile, unrefined, and primitive “low” culture. They did their job so well that any straightforward discussion of progressive ideas in the pages of comics would be censored as being too dangerous and complex for the developing minds of children. Any metaphor, allegory, or subtext that evaded the censors (and there were myriad) could either be hand-waived away as coincidental, or as expressions of childish naïveté — the stuff of fairy tales.



In the cases of both superheroes and Shakespeare, the paternalistic administration of the cultural status quo attempted to blunt the impact of potential change agents through the weaponization of a recently constructed artificial barrier between popular "low" or folk culture and "high" culture. Any acknowledgement of high culture's popular roots — or any dialogue allowed to happen between works of "high" and "low" culture — would have opened the door for the radical reconsideration of the literary canon at a time when the wider culture was primed for it. Such dialogue would have legitimized the cultural contributions of a wide swath of underrepresented creators across *centuries*, much like pulling a sword from a stone legitimized the squire who was an orphan and a bastard.

## Part 2: The Days of the Knights

Gone are the days of the knights  
Of the Round Table and fights  
Of the realm of King Arthur  
Peace ever after  
Gone are the days of the knights.<sup>40</sup>

– Rick Wakeman, *The Last Battle*

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<sup>40</sup> From “The Last Battle,” the final song on the 1975 studio album *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* by English keyboardist Rick Wakeman, A&M Records. It is a concept album based on Arthurian legend.

## ***Chapter 5: A Name Half-Whispered***

### **The Historical King Arthur**

“*Arthur*. Wherever I go on this wretched island, I hear your name. Always half-whispered, as if you were ... a god.”

#### **–Stellan Skarsgård as Cerdic in “King Arthur” (2004)**

Having seen a white flag waved by a traitorous British scout atop a tree, Clive Owen’s Artorius Castus trots through a haze of smoke and burning tar, and emerges from a gate in Hadrian’s Wall atop a braying white horse draped in chainmail, his battle-worn cavalry armor embellished with chipped gold edges, his crested officer’s helmet darkened by years of blood, soot, and dirt. Saxon leader Cerdic (Stellan Skarsgård) has called a parlay in order to at last look this Roman general in the eye before what is to be a pivotal battle. Having witnessed the carnage Cerdic and his men have wrought on their march south, the mounted Artorius circles the eerily calm Cerdic, who remains quietly confident on foot, his words never rising above a low growl.

“*Arthur*,” Cerdic breathes. “Wherever I go on this wretched island, I hear your name. Always half whispered, as if you were a ... *god*. All I see is flesh, blood. No more god than the creature you're sitting on.”

“Speak your terms, Saxon,” Artorius replies.

“The Romans have left you,” Cerdic prods. “Who are you fighting for?”

“I fight for a cause beyond yours or Rome’s understanding,” says Artorius. Cerdic seems to consider this as he puts his head down and smiles to himself, amused.

“If you come to beg a truce, you should be on your knees,” says Cerdic.

At this point, Artorius presumes that his now-discharged Sarmatian knights, their families, and the civilians who populated the Roman fort he garrisoned are well on their way to their home, and therefore safety. Though Lancelot (Ioan Gruffud) had begged his commander to come with them, Artorius chose to stay and fight alongside his mother's people – the native Woads – along with their warrior queen Guinevere and shaman Merlin. As far as Artorius knows, his highly-trained warriors will not be by his side in the battle to come. And yet, he points Excalibur at Cerdic and makes a promise: “I came to see your face so that I alone may find you on the battlefield. And you would do well to mark my face, Saxon, for the next time you see it, it will be the last thing you see on this earth.”

Artorius wheels his horse around and returns to the smoke-clouded wall, as Cerdic thumps his chest and says to himself, with some satisfaction: “Ahhh, finally: A man worth killing.”

Artorius returns through the wall's gate to find that indeed, his faithful surviving knights have returned to him. They eventually prevail, fighting alongside the natives to repel the Saxons at what a closing voiceover by the disembodied spirit of Lancelot tells the audience is “Badon Hill,” and Artorius goes on to marry Guinevere, after which Merlin dubs him King Arthur. The film received tepid reviews and a middling box office haul, and there was quite a bit of liberty taken with the historical facts, but it was notably the first time on film that King Arthur had appeared as anything but a plate-armored chivalric knight of the high medieval period. It was purportedly based on the true story of King Arthur, based on “new archeological evidence” recently uncovered, or so a title card obtusely told us.

But, was there *really* a historical King Arthur? Much like the theory of Atlantis (to save you time: It was merely a thought exercise by Plato, likely inspired by the eruption of Santorini)

and the location of the Lost Ark of the Covenant (there is ample circumstantial evidence to suggest that the Ark or Arks probably existed, but there exist no firsthand contemporaneous accounts of its fate), that question has been reliable History Channel fodder for decades. The answer to the question of the existence of a historical Arthur lies somewhere in the space between the other two – between fact and fiction.

Much like Barthes's conception of a Text, the Figure of Arthur resists classification. He may have been several men, several generations of men, or he may have just been a clever warrior chieftain with a great publicist. Whatever or whoever Arthur was, though, why should it matter? We *are* talking about a literary character here, right? Ah, yes, Dear Reader, but the fact is that King Arthur's literary form is deeply intertwined with the historical origins of his Text and therefore his own historicity.

The difficulty, of course, with Arthur's historicity is the fact that there is no authenticated surviving relic – no rusted blade dredged up from the bottom of a placid Welsh lake, bearing the easily-read inscription "Excalibur." We do not have the body, as it were, though there was a strong effort made on the part of the monks of Glastonbury Abbey. In 1191, just a few decades after Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae made Arthur a Continental star, the monks of Glastonbury – a location which had already long been reputed to be the origin of the Isle of Avalon myth – claimed to have unearthed a leaden cross tombstone and two skeletons (purportedly Arthur and Guinevere) at the Abbey in what amounts to a 12th century publicity stunt to drum up tourism,<sup>41</sup> and serving as propaganda for the English against the Welsh, proving to them definitively that their savior was permanently deceased and would never return to liberate them.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Ash. "Glastonbury." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

<sup>42</sup> "Introduction to Translation of 'The Tomb of King Arthur, by Gerald of Wales.'" John William Sutton, *The Camelot Project: A Robbins Library Digital Project*, University of Rochester, 2001, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/gerald-of-wales-arthurs-tomb>. Accessed 2024.

Of course, the problem with using Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae as a guide is that, for one, it is a fictionalized dramatization that draws on orally-transmitted local myth and legend, written after more than 500 years after any possible historical antecedent of Arthur would have been active (that's one *very* long game of historical telephone). Geoffrey also cites a mysterious lost book – presented to him by Walter, the Archdeacon of Gloucester – as *his* primary source. That likely fictitious volume has yet to be uncovered in the nearly nine centuries since Geoffrey wrote. Yet, while we lack any material proof of a historical King Arthur, we do have some tantalizing clues, starting with the very title of Geoffrey's opus.

### **What's in a Name**

While the word "Britain" is colloquially used to refer to England, the United Kingdom, Great Britain, the Kingdom of Great Britain, and the British Empire, that is a somewhat recent development. It is derived from the word *Britannia*, the name of the Roman province on the largest of the British Isles (hence, *Great Britain*), which stretched from the island's southern tip up to Caledonia in the north. Before Geoffrey's Historia Regum Britanniae, the anonymously-authored ninth-century purported history of the island, Historia Brittonum also employed the same root. That work posits that the etymological origin of the name Britain lies in the name of Brutus of Troy, the great-grandson of Trojan War hero Aeneas (who, according to Virgil's Aeneid, is also an ancestor of the founders of Rome – Romulus and Remus).

As the legend goes, long after the Trojan War, Brutus and his family settled in Italy with other members of the post-war Trojan diaspora. After accidentally killing his father during a hunt, Brutus is banished from the community. During his subsequent wanderings, he happens upon another colony of displaced Trojans, where he asks a statue of the Greek goddess Diana

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(which also happens to be the name of the alter ego of Wonder Woman, who herself has origins in Hellenistic myth) for guidance:

*Diva potens nemorum, terror sylvestribus apris; Cui licet amfractus ire  
æthereos, Infernasque domos; terrestria jura resolve, Et dic quas terras nos habitare  
velis? Dic certam sedem qua te venerabor in ævum, Qua tibi virgineis templa dicabo  
choris!*

Goddess of woods, tremendous in the chase  
To mountain board, and all the savage  
race! Wide o'er the ethereal walks extend thy sway,  
And o'er the infernal mansions void of  
day! Look upon us on earth! unfold our fate,  
And say what region is our destined  
seat? Where shall we next thy lasting temples raise?  
And choirs of virgins celebrate thy  
praise?<sup>43</sup>

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

*Brute! sub accasum solis trans Gallica regna  
Insula in oceano est undique clausa  
mari: Insula in oceano est habitata gigantibus olim,  
Nunc deserta quidem, gentibus apta  
tuis. Hanc pete, namque tibi sedes erit illa perennis:  
Sic fiet natis altera Troja tuis. Sic de  
prole tua reges nascentur: et ipsis Totius terræ subditus orbus erit.*

Brutus! there lies beyond the Gallic bounds  
An island which the western sea surrounds,  
By giants once possessed, now few remain  
To bar thy entrance, or obstruct thy reign.  
To reach that happy shore thy sails employ  
There fate decrees to raise a second Troy  
And found an empire in thy royal line,  
Which time shall ne'er destroy, nor bounds confine.<sup>44</sup>

Upon arriving on the southwestern shore of the island – then called Albion – Brutus establishes a settlement, and when the native giants who inhabit the island threaten to destroy the settlement, he slaughters them.<sup>45</sup> Brutus establishes a capital city on what would become the River Thames, names this city Troia Nova (New Troy), and becomes the first king of the land he names after himself – Britain.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book I, Ch. XI

<sup>44</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book I, Ch. XI

<sup>45</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book I, Ch. XVI

<sup>46</sup> Clark, John. "Trinovantum — the Evolution of a Legend." *Journal of Medieval History* 7, no. 2 (1981): 135–51.  
doi:10.1016/0304-4181(81)90024-5.

The people of the island would hereafter be called British, and speak in the British tongue – not Greek or Trojan – according to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Thus, all the kings of Britain are said to descend from Brutus, Aeneas, and therefore the royal family of Troy, meaning they share a lineage with the founders of Rome. Or, at least, that's what it says in Historia Brittonum (sometimes attributed to Nennius because of his added commentary) and in Geoffrey's subsequent 12th century Historia Regum Britanniae.

In actuality, *Britannia* is a Latinization of *Prydein*, a Middle Welsh name for the same region. *Prydein* itself evolved from the name, *\*Pritaniuuuuuul*, from the proto-Celtic language called *Common Brittonic*, dating to the sixth century B.C.E. *\*Pritaniuuuuuul* gave birth to the Greek terms (*Prettanike* and *Brettaniai*) for the natives of the British islands – the Celts, Welsh, and Scots.<sup>47</sup> Following the sixth-century Anglo-Saxon invasion, the term *Briton* continued to be used to refer to the native, Celtic-speaking peoples,<sup>48</sup> while the eastern portion of the island was referred to as the land of the Angles – eventually England (Angle Land).

Whenever citing the aforementioned mysterious lost book as his source, Geoffrey uses the phrase “*ex Britannia*” – “from (or out of) Britannia.” At the time he was writing, that would have been understood to mean that this mysterious book came “out of Wales.”<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey “undoubtedly had access to Welsh insular traditions—written, oral, or more likely both,”<sup>50</sup> and it is therefore primarily these Welsh sources that Geoffrey of Monmouth used in constructing his narrative of Britain's origin.

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<sup>47</sup> Rhys, Guto. "Approaching the Pictish language: historiography, early evidence and the question of Pritenic" (<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/6285/7/2015RhysPhD.pdf>). University of Glasgow.

<sup>48</sup> "Britishness". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. September 2008. Retrieved 14 September 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Barber, 38

<sup>50</sup> Blake, Steve. Pendragon: The Definitive Account of the Origins of Arthur. London: Samuel French, 2002 pp. 37



So, which is it: Welsh or Roman? The same question can be asked about the mysterious warrior who led a combined force of native armies against a Saxon incursion at the Battle of Mt. Badon.

### **The Last True Roman**

By the late fourth century of the Common Era, the Roman Empire had overextended its armies, and was thus unable to defend its most distant borders. It began to withdraw from what were deemed indefensible, far-flung outposts, including the isle of Britannia. Garrisons abandoned the once-mighty Hadrian's Wall and retreated to Rome. At least, most of them did.

As Rome recalled its native sons, those of mixed parentage (Romano-Briton) or descended from conquered peoples the Romans had brought to Britain – such as the Baltic Sarmatians – likely stayed behind and were absorbed by what was left of the native peoples. Geoffrey of Monmouth writes that the retreating Romans had left the indigenous people essentially defenseless against opportunistic invaders like the Saxons – a group of Germanic peoples from the North Sea coast of northern Germania – who rushed in to claim the island as their own. During this upheaval, at some point prior to 500 C.E., the Saxon advance was halted by a mysterious British warrior chieftain. At nearly the same time, British refugees from the Saxon invasion colonized Brittany on the coast of France, and in 468 C.E., the “King of Britons” crossed into the Roman province of Gaul.<sup>51</sup>

While the island of Britain purportedly drew its name from Brutus and his royal lineage, the English (descended from those same Saxons) would later derisively refer only to the western regions as Britain as a way to Other the native peoples of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland – groups

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<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Ash. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

who may have, according to some theories, been integral in the initial repulsion of the Saxon advance under that mysterious British warrior, the “King of Britons.”

The very first mention of an individual that resembles the literary King Arthur – one recognizable to modern readers – comes from the vitriolic sixth-century British monk Gildas, who wrote *De Excidio Britanniae* (On the Ruin of Britain), between 520 and 560 C.E.<sup>52</sup> Gildas’ account is the textual origin point for the idea that a real historical Arthur was the victorious commander at the Battle of Badon Hill. Gildas is a Briton, writing on the eventual fall of Britain (Wales) to the Saxons, and often laments the cowardice displayed by fellow Britons in battle, comparing them unfavorably to the exploits of a man named Ambrosius Aurelianus. Ambrosius Aurelianus is represented in *De Excidio* as the savior of the island from the Saxon incursion, and the “only true Roman” left. Curiously, 10 years after Gildas wrote his *De Excidio*, the Roman-sounding name “Artorius” underwent a revival in popularity, as attested to in contemporary documents.<sup>53</sup>

It isn’t until the seventh-century Welsh poem, *Y Gododdin*, that we get a proper reference to Arthur-as-Arthur, albeit an oblique one. In that poem, composed in Old Welsh, 80 warriors are praised for their deeds in the battle at Catraeth in 600 C.E. One of those warriors is lauded for fighting bravely, “even though he was no Arthur.” *Historia Brittonum*, written in 828 C.E. is the first text to mention Arthur as a *dux bellorum* (Latin for “war leader”) or ‘general,’ who fought and won 12 named battles, and is credited with single handedly slaying 960 foes at Mt. Badon, indicating that even at this early juncture, the Figure of Arthur has already achieved legendary status in the local Welsh and Celtic oral tradition.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Barber, Richard. *The Figure of Arthur*. London: Longman, 1972. pp. 39-53.

<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Ash. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

Stories about Arthur and the wizard Merlin entered the oral tradition in the so-called Celtic Fringe (Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany) from the seventh through the 11th centuries, gaining both popularity and momentum. Tales were first circulated to the Continent by Breton storytellers, sowing the seeds for the eventual French redactions of the Arthur story.

With so few extant textual mentions and primary sources proximal to the historical origin point, how did Arthur spread so quickly once Geoffrey penned *Historia*? Given that those early mentions already referred so casually and matter-of-factly to Arthur as cultural shorthand for martial and strategic prowess, it is evident that the Figure of Arthur was already *by definition* part of an oral folk cultural tradition, a folk hero whose stories were primarily transmitted in the native spoken languages of the Britons – the people who resisted the Anglo-Saxon incursions. In fact, it is from the languages of these native peoples that we catch the first glimpse of what would become the most important weapon in literary history.

### **The Legend of the Sword**

Whether it was bestowed upon Arthur by the Lady of the Lake or whether he assayed it from a stone in a London churchyard as a squire, whether it was a broadsword or a blade made from Roman patterns, whether it was the trusted cavalry sword of the “last true Roman” or whether it passed down from Arthur to Arthur to Arthur, one of the most enduring elements in Arthurian lore is the great sword Excalibur: A symbol of the right to rule; an unbreakable, insuperable weapon; a symbol of Arthur’s familial legacy; a relic of eldritch magicks lost to time – the sword has been matched in its importance to Arthurian lore only by the Holy Grail.

Squint hard enough and it even may make an appearance in the Brad Pitt-led sword-and-sandal epic “Troy” (2004): During the third act, Paris (Orlando Bloom) hands a young Aeneas the fictional Sword of Troy (it appears nowhere in any surviving Homeric or

post-Homeric Greek tradition of the Trojan War), so that he may protect Trojan refugees, and ensure the survival of the people and their ideals. “As long as it remains in the hands of a Trojan, our people have a future,” Paris says. “Take them, Aeneas. Find them a new home.”<sup>55</sup> The sword is said in the film to belong to King Priam, and its passing is meant to give legitimacy and continuity to the royal line of Troy, which will in turn lay the foundations of Rome and eventually Britain. The sword is not explicitly Excalibur, and it may not even have been meant as a reference to it – the film purports to take place in the 14th century B.C.E. – but its function and place in the story certainly evoke the mighty blade.

While Excalibur is not, in primary sources, ever tied back to Britain’s reputed Trojan origins, its story is still older than many realize, meaning that it almost does not look like the medieval blade many envision. The Welsh Triads – a series of tales dating from the early 11th century which preserve fragments of earlier Welsh folklore and mythology and refer to Arthur and other semi-historical characters from sub-Roman Britain – reference a weapon called *Caledvwlch*, specifically in the story *Culhwch ac Olwen* about a hero connected to Arthur. The name of the sword roughly translates to ‘hard-cleft’ and it is said to be a gift from God. This early version of Arthur’s sword contains the root of all of its future names—“-cal-”—and, when swung around the bearer, slays his surrounding enemies with a blinding flash of light: “Llenlleawn the Irishman seized Caledvwlch, swung it round in a circle and killed Diwnach the Irishman and his entire retinue.”<sup>56</sup>

The early dates of the Welsh mentions, and their availability as sources for Geoffrey’s work, point toward a Welsh origin for a historical Arthur, possibly Gildas’ Aurelianus. But if it was Aurelianus (clearly not a Welsh name), how do we come by the name Arthur (which is

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<sup>55</sup> Petersen, Wolfgang., et al. *Troy*. 2-disc full-screen ed. Burbank, CA, Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> The Mabinogion, Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin, 1976. pp. 170.

clearly not Aurelianus)? Why, 10 years after Gildas writes, did the Roman-sounding name “Artorius” gain in popularity, and not Abrosius or its derivatives? And how does Arthur or Artorius or Aurelianus come to be linked to *Caledfwlch*? And why care about a sword in the first place? In Historia Brittonum, the mention of Arthur as a *dux bellorum* (battle lord), hints at perhaps a different significance of the name “Arthur.” In Welsh, the root of the name Arthur – *arth* – means “the bear,” which, like *dux bellorum*, is likely a title given to a tribal chieftain or wartime leader.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps, like the names of superheroes, it was a *nom de guerre* – not quite a ‘secret identity,’ but an embryonic form of it that allowed conflation and elision. In Latin, *arto* – a possible root for the Roman “Artorius” – means “to press together” or “abridged,” giving us yet another clue as to the true nature of the name of the mysterious warrior.

It is highly likely that the name Arthur comes from a title passed down from generation to generation of local warrior chieftains. Because of the title they bore – which, as with the title Caesar becoming synonymous with Julius Caesar, came to be synonymous with the leader of the Battle of Mt. Badon – these individuals came to be conflated into a single figure we now know as King Arthur (hence, ‘pressed together’).<sup>58</sup> It follows that a historical Excalibur would have

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<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey Ash. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

<sup>58</sup> We observe the same phenomenon with modern superheroes. It is common practice for certain legacy superhero titles to be passed down to different individuals when a hero ages out, is incapacitated, dies in the line of duty, or mysteriously disappears.

Often, in later redactions or interpretations – such as films and television programs – the deeds and characteristics of the various incarnations of these identities become compressed and combined, so that the Ghost Rider, Johnny Blaze – as played by Nicolas Cage in two early-2000s films – wears the black biking leathers popularized by the version of the character whose human identity was that of Blaze’s half brother, Johnny Ketch.

Another example of such transferable titles is Captain America. While the “one true” Captain America will always be the original – Steve Rogers – the 1950s version of the character was retconned to be a different individual entirely: Insane history professor William Burnside, who fought Communists and eventually became the villainous Grand Director. Another mid-’50s appearance was retroactively assigned to Jeffrey Mace (also known as a hero in his own right as the Spirit of ‘76). John Walker replaced Rogers when a disgusted Rogers turned his back on a corrupt government, and he eventually took Rogers’ costume template and became his own superhero: USAGent. For several issues in the mid-1970s, Rogers again quits the identity of Captain America, and taps Roscoe Simmons (the only man other than Sam Wilson to take the mantle with Rogers’ explicit blessing) as his replacement before soon returning.

The title of Black Panther is perhaps closest to the Arthur title, having been held for generations by warrior kings of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. In the comics, the most notable have been King T’Chaka (retroactively inserted into Captain America and Wolverine’s WWII adventures), his son Prince and then King T’Challa, and T’Challa’s sister Princess Shuri.

been a richly adorned weapon of superior quality that served as a mark of office, boldly marking its owner as a ruler, commander, chieftain, or high king. In fact, this tradition resurfaces in the later retellings of the Arthur story, most famously in Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, where a young Arthur pulls a sword (in some iterations this is Excalibur, in others it is not) from a stone, thereby passing the test of kingship by liberating the sword of his father, the former High King. A version of this also occurs in the 2004 film, where a young Arthur extricates the sword from the burial mound of his father (narration by Lancelot says that he is ancestrally named for the "first Artorius," though it's unclear if that refers to his father or a more remote forebear) in an attempt to save his village from a group of marauders.

There remains a problem, though: Why would a native-born warrior chieftain of the Britons bear the Roman title of *dux bellorum* or the Latinized name Artorius? If he were purely a native, he would likely have been part of a people cruelly subjugated to the Romans. He would have resented them, not led them. He certainly would not be Gildas' "last true Roman." These difficulties would seem to sink the possibility of Aurelianus as an historical Arthur. However, they do raise yet another tantalizing possibility.

There is yet another man who bore a ceremonial and honorific name that can lay claim to the title of historical King Arthur, a "last true Roman" whose background gives even further insight into how a possible real Excalibur – the actual cold steel of the blade – looked and felt: second-century general Lucius Artorius Castus. The favorite of some to be the 'real' King Arthur

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The original Flash of 1940 was originally the Mercury-helmed Jay Garrick, known as the Crimson Comet, but when the title was rebooted in the mid-1950s, Garrick was relegated to an alternate universe in favor of forensic scientist Barry Allen, then the wisecracking Wally West, and then the impulsive Bart Allen. Eventually, Garrick was retconned into an older mentor figure to the Allen-West Flash Family.

The first Green Lantern, Alan Scott, debuted in 1940 as a hero with mystical powers. When the title was revived in 1959 with a sci-fi motif, the Green Lantern Corps emerged, composed of myriad individuals who bore the title. In that space-faring version, the title of Green Lantern of Sector 2814 (the space sector containing Earth) has been held by Hal Jordan, Guy Gardner, John Stewart, Kyle Rayner, Simon Baz, Jessica Cruz, and Sojourner Mullein.

– or at least chief among the several men of which King Arthur is a composite – Castus serves as the nominal inspiration for the 2004 film, which finds a middle ground between theories favoring Aurelianus and those favoring Castus. Current scholarship refers to this possibility as the “second Artorius.”<sup>59</sup>

The film establishes this Artorius as the son of a Christian Roman soldier and a native pagan British mother. While the film takes great artistic license with the realities of the period, the idea of a multi-generational familial/honorific name does track with the theory that Arthur, or Artorius, or Ambrosius (or all three) bore an inherited patronym (a familial name) that became an aptronym (a name or title that fits with one’s occupation).

If Arthur was at least part Roman or descended from Roman stock, it is highly likely – if not probable – that the historical antecedent for an Excalibur used as a mark of office was a richly-adorned weapon made in the Roman style, if not a Roman-made blade. Geoffrey stated that the Roman soldiers left behind “patterns of their arms,”<sup>60</sup> when they were recalled from the British frontier, and Roman-style arms have been unearthed in Britain in modern times. It stands to reason, then, that the most likely candidate for a historical Excalibur is a Roman cavalry sword called a *spatha*, eight examples of which have been found at British archaeological sites. The long, straight, single-edged blade was typically 27 inches (0.68 meters) long – longer than its cousin the gladius (19-26 inches) – and intended for cutting and thrusting.<sup>61</sup> As a cavalry sword, a *spatha* was designed to be wielded from horseback – which Excalibur is described as being.<sup>62</sup>

The *spatha* was used – in one formation or another – by Roman armies of the first through seventh centuries of the Common Era, and remained popular in medieval Europe well into the 11th and 12th centuries. A *spatha* made for use in service of the Empire would have

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<sup>59</sup>Geoffrey Ash. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>60</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book VI, Ch. 3

<sup>61</sup> Evangelista, 508

<sup>62</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book IX, Ch. 10

been a prized possession because of its superior craftsmanship. Here again, the conceit of conflation works nicely. The sword wielded by Clive Owen's cinematic Artorius is not the medieval blade depicted in many popular illustrations and prop reproductions (or the one on my wall). While longer than the sword of a Roman foot soldier – a gladius – the typical *spatha* is shorter and broader than a traditional two-handed or hand-and-a-half broadswords of the High Medieval period (1000-1300 C.E.). *Spathae* are one-handed swords meant for swinging from horseback, not for thrusting and probing to find weaknesses in the joints of plate armor. They are blunter at the tip, and do not have an extended crossguard. While the 2004 prop Excalibur still retains the gold-colored handle and hilt that have become synonymous with the weapon, and while the practical prop measures in at an overall length of 47 ¼ inches (more in-line with its High Medieval brethren), this version's shape is still unmistakably derivative of the Roman *spatha*, its quillons are practically non-existent, and – in agreement with the weapon's early folk history – it is given almost reverential treatment by the native Britons who encounter it. One Woad even says, with the blade up against his neck: "Spill my blood with Excalibur and ... make this ground holy."

However, the collective minutiae of a 21st century movie is certainly not definitive enough to close the book on who the "real" King Arthur may have been. The real Castus's military record services that ambition well enough on its own: Commemorated on two monuments in Yugoslavia (once the Roman province of Pannonia), Castus had a distinguished military career serving the Roman Empire, ranging from service in Judea to being named the *Praefectus* of the *Legio VI Victrix*, stationed at York, in the Roman province of Britannia. At one point in his career in Britannia, Castus was sent on an expedition to Brittany (Wales and Cornwall) to suppress a rebellion, and was a general in command of a mixed force of legionaries



and auxiliaries.<sup>63</sup> This mixed force included Sarmatian cavalry, the members of which were forcibly inducted into the Roman fighting force when emperor Marcus Aurelius recruited 8,000 of them as auxiliaries in 175 C.E. Most of them (5,500) were sent to Northern Britain to battle the native Picts (called Woads in the 2004 film). The legion they were attached to was none other than the *Legio VI Victrix*, commanded by Castus, who had served in their homeland.<sup>64</sup>

Sarmatian culture placed high value on horsemanship and swordsmanship, and a warrior's sword was seen as his greatest treasure.<sup>65</sup> Two and a half centuries after they were brought to Britannia, they still retained a very strong tribal identity despite serving the Romans in a foreign land, thousands of miles from home. This strong sense of tribal identity likely contributed to the continued crystallization of important motifs that appear throughout Arthurian lore.

For one, the Sarmatians worshiped their god of war by planting a naked sword in the ground or on a raised platform. Sound familiar? It should: Later redactors of Arthuriana would have to negotiate this overtly pagan—and phallic—symbolism as the sword became an increasingly indispensable element of the Arthur story. The Auchinleck, for example, negotiates this by placing the sword in an anvil, atop a stone, in a churchyard, thereby turning a pagan ritual into a figuration of the Cross.<sup>66</sup> Instead of being a finely-crafted Roman blade used to unite pagan tribes against invading Saxons, its appearance is attributed to “Ihesu Crist on heighe.”<sup>67</sup> It becomes a sword stuck “long and heighe,” not one buried in a stone or the ground, as if driven in by hand (a more slantwise proposition than a sword standing straight up and down).

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<sup>63</sup> Barber, 37

<sup>64</sup> Helmut Nickel. “Sarmatian Connection.” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>65</sup> “Sarmatian.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 1 May 2008  
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9065786>>.

<sup>66</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 2783

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2814

The Sarmatians were also responsible for bringing to the *Legio VI Victrix* a mascot of sorts: a battle standard in the form of a windsock dragon on a pole.<sup>68</sup> The dragon is the linchpin that binds all of the disparate elements of the sword's journey and Arthur's historicity into a single, coherent literature.

Because of Castus' familiarity with the Sarmatians, his name is likely to have been remembered by the Sarmatian troops in Britain "and their descendants as a synonym for "the General," as the name Caesar became a title for the Romans, and lived on as Kaiser and Tsar among further generations."<sup>69</sup> The similarity of the name Artorius to Arthur, and their mutual use as honorific names or titles of highly-regarded warriors, both of whom are referred to as a *dux bellorum* suggests – at the very least – that if these two men were not related in some manner, then they were staggeringly similar and were conflated to form the figure we now know as King Arthur. These facts provide precedence for an honorific name linguistically proximal to the Welsh honorific "Arthur," and perhaps a justification for the use of that title by later British warrior chieftains. This link is perhaps a bit too tenuous, however, until one considers the way in which Arthur fulfills Coogan's Identity and Chevron/Costume requirements.

## The Red Dragon of Wales

As Vortegirn, king of the Britons, was sitting upon the bank of the drained pond, the two dragons, one of which was white, the other red, came forth, and approaching one another, began a terrible fight, and cast forth fire with their breath. But the white dragon had the advantage, and made the other fly to the end of the lake. And he, for grief at his flight, renewed the assault upon his pursuer, and forced him to retire. After this battle of the dragons, the king commanded Ambrose Merlin to tell him what it portended. Upon which he, bursting into tears, delivered what his prophetic spirit suggested to him, as follows:-

"Woe to the red dragon, for his banishment hasteneth on. His lurking holes shall be seized by the white dragon, which signifies the Saxons whom you invited over; but the red denotes the British

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<sup>68</sup> Deligiannis, Periklis. "King Arthur (Part II): Some Literary, Archaeological and Historical Evidence." KavehFarrokhi.com, 31 Aug. 2019, <https://www.kavehfarrokhi.com/uncategorized/king-arthur-part-ii-some-literary-archaeological-and-historical-evidence/>.

<sup>69</sup> Helmut Nickel. "Sarmatian Connection." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

nation, which shall be oppressed by the white. Therefore shall its mountains be levelled as the valleys, and the rivers of the valleys shall run with blood. The exercise of religion shall be destroyed, and churches be laid open to ruin. At last the oppressed shall prevail, and oppose the cruelty of foreigners. For a boar of Cornwall<sup>70</sup> shall give his assistance, and trample their necks under his feet. The islands of the ocean shall be subject to his power, and he shall possess the forests of Gaul. 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.<sup>71</sup>

Not long after the exploits of Castus and Aurelianus, the region of Wales took as its national emblem an icon which persists to this day—a red dragon. The medieval literary Arthur came to be known as Arthur Pendragon, or “head dragon,” a name that has parallels in the Central Asian languages familiar to and used by the Sarmatians—*pan*, meaning ‘lord,’ and *tarkhan*, meaning ‘leader.’ His anachronistically heraldic shield was variously depicted as having a painting of three gold crowns on a blue field, then 13 crowns on a blue field, and – most popularly – a red dragon on a field of gold or a gold dragon on a field of red. Frank D. Reno alternatively posits that Julius Caesar’s emblem – a purple dragon – was the origin since, according to Wace, Ambrosius’s family had “worn the purple” (been of aristocratic blood)<sup>72</sup>: “through the generations ... [the purple dragon] was slightly altered to Ambrosius’s red one, a standard that has become the flag of Wales.”<sup>73</sup>

Either way, Arthur is inextricably linked with explicitly non-Christian pagan symbology. It is in that symbology of the red dragon where three variants of Arthur meet – the Welsh folk hero, the Romano-Briton commander, and the imperial conqueror who marched on Europe. It is from that nexus that the British Empire emerged, led by a family of monarchs – the Tudors – who legitimated their rule through a claimed descent from a Welsh King Arthur.

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<sup>70</sup> In Celtic mythology, the boar represented – among other things – a courageous warrior. Here, the boar is a prefiguration of Arthur, whose mother Igraine was married to Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, when Uther assumed Gorlois’ form to lay with her and conceive Arthur.

<sup>71</sup> *Historia*, Book VII, Chapter III

<sup>72</sup> Korrel, Peter. *An Arthurian Triangle: A Study of the Origin, Development, and Characterization of Arthur, Guinevere, and Modred*. Brill Archive, 1984. pp. 5-30

<sup>73</sup> Reno, Frank D. *The Historic King Arthur: Authenticating the Celtic Hero of Post-Roman Britain*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996. pp. 264.

Other Welsh works, including *Spoils of Annwfn*, written in 950 C.E., and the contemporary *Annales Cambriae*, refer to the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and a villainous character named Medraut (later to become Arthur's rebellious illegitimate son, Mordred) fell. In 1019, the *Legenda Sancti Geoznovii* offer what the New Arthurian Encyclopedia calls the "first "historical" mention of Arthur." In 1050, the *Mabinogion* – the earliest Welsh prose stories compiled in Middle Welsh in the 12th and 13th centuries from earlier, well-established local oral traditions – gives context and texture to this formative period for Arthur, offering a mixture of pagan and Christian imagery in association with characters that "appear with Arthur in other branches of the tradition, and the tales depict a world in which the native Welsh Arthur would be very much at home."<sup>74</sup> The characters "swear by God, and there is a bishop and a priest in the third branch, but the tales are clearly pre- or at least non-Christian."<sup>75</sup> The four branches of early Arthuriana each reflect inherited Celtic tradition in the Middle Ages, and represent a transitional period for the character as he moved from the space of pagan Celtic and Welsh folk legend to becoming the canonized Christian English king.

The aforementioned *Culhwch ac Olwen* – a classic hero quest – is part of the *Mabinogion*. This King Arthur is very different than the one most would recognize today. He is depicted as a "great king whose reputation is far-flung, his activities are far from those of the feudal overlord of romance. Rather, he is like the hero in a wonder tale, aided by magic and accompanied by men with supernatural gifts, and his chief opponent has affinities with the divine animals of Celtic mythological tradition."<sup>76</sup> This work is also the first time that Arthur and a weapon recognizable as his Excalibur appear together, combining elements of the Welsh folk

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<sup>74</sup> Patrick K. Ford. "Mabinobi." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

Arthur, Artorius, Ambrosius Aurelianus, and the Galfridian Arthur.<sup>77</sup> Between 1136 and 1138, Geoffrey of Monmouth penned his famous work, which was then quickly distributed around the Continent in various languages within an astonishingly quick two decades. It took more than 150 years for the four canonical gospels to spread.<sup>78</sup>

Crucially, as you can see, Arthurian “literature” – in its earliest, purest, and most formative period – was not written down. It was an oral tradition, bearing the authentic marks of the cultures that contributed to it, invested with their hopes, anxieties, politics, superstitions, religions, mythology, symbology, and values. It was in oral composition that Arthur became conflated with the Celtic heroes who bore the sword *Caledfwlch*, acquiring the essential elements by which we recognize him today.<sup>79</sup> Like the stories that filled Geertz’s notebooks, these stories were very much a Text of acted culture.

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<sup>77</sup> “Galfridian” means or relating to the version of Arthur who appears in the works of the cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth, or as he was known in Latin, *Galfridus Monemutensis*.

<sup>78</sup> The preceding chronology I owe to p. xxxiii-xxxv of the New Arthurian Encyclopedia.

<sup>79</sup> Norris J. Lacy. “Folklore.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

## ***Chapter 6: When I Look to the Sky***

### **From Work to Text: Social Authorship**

When I look to the sky,  
something tells me you're here with me

**– Train, *When I Look to the Sky***

So, you may be wondering: Why is “Text” capitalized in some cases (like the end of the last chapter), but not in others? When dealing with a body of literature as prolific as Arthuriana or as expansive as the universes of comic book superheroes (and believe me, they are expansive—each volume of the Arthurian, Marvel, and DC encyclopediae could injure small children), it is crucial to acknowledge that each individual work – each book, each song, each issue, and so on – exists as part of a larger Thing, like how a song is part of an album (at least, in the days of vinyl, when albums were created as unified artistic statements, and not simply collections of singles), or each chapter is part of a book. That Thing is called a Text, or what is more commonly referred to as “lore,” in the context of modern shared-universe media such as video game, comic book, high fantasy, and film franchises (think Alien/Predator, Star Wars, Star Trek, and Lord of the Rings).

Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician – an expert in the study of literary signs and symbolism – produced a body of work in his 64 years on this planet that touched upon structuralism, anthropology, literary theory, and post-structuralism. His theories on authorship and mythology can rightly be said to be a cornerstone of this work, and many others dealing in the analysis of popular culture.

In his 1977 essay, *From Work to Text*, Barthes establishes that a Text is not a definitive object. The simplest distinction that he offers is the one which I instruct readers to keep in mind

when understanding the rest of Barthes' argument. The work "can be held in the hand," while the Text "is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse (or rather, it is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text)" (Barthes, 157).<sup>80</sup> There is a shade of metatextual awareness here, like how Deadpool knows he's a comic book character.

Think of the distinction between text and Text like the difference between truth and Truth. I'll refer to my second-favorite professor of all time, one Dr. Henry Jones Jr.: "Archeology is the search for fact, not Truth. If it's Truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's Philosophy class is right down the hall."<sup>81</sup> The truth is, as Dr. Jones says, the facts of history. The Truth, however, is much more elusive, and yet, it is recognizable.

A text is the matter of a single work – the words on the page. A Text includes more than just the sum of those words on the pages of the works it contains. My favorite (real life) professor, Prof. Miller, described this type of self-aware, super-textual knowledge as existing "in the air" – i.e. things people *just know*. For instance, while individual works of Arthurian literature may differ on the details, this meta-textual knowledge informs nearly every version, in some form or another: King Arthur was the son of an important leader, but remained anonymous/ignorant to his inheritance until he proved his worthiness to rule by performing a seemingly superhuman feat; he kept company with figures possessing supernatural gifts and practicing old (pre-Christian) magic; he wielded a sword that served as a symbol of adamantite resolve; he united warring factions by rallying them to a common cause; he was a shining example of courage and honor, ultimately undone by treachery, deceit, and betrayal; he gave his own life in defense of his country, yet is promised to return. To refer to a Text is to refer to the body of literature that constitutes a tradition. Work on the other hand, is concrete.

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<sup>80</sup> Roland Barthes. Image—Music—Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. pp. 157.

<sup>81</sup> Lucasfilm Ltd.; director, Steven Spielberg; performer, Harrison Ford; producer, Robert Watts; screenplay, Jeffrey Boam. "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade". Hollywood, CA: Lucasfilm Ltd. Production: released by Paramount Pictures, 1989.

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

Though the film is a work—it can be held in the hand as a film reel or a DVD—it is a part of the greater Text. In fact, Downey Jr. makes a cameo of his own in a similar post-credits scene at the end of the “Incredible Hulk” film, starring Edward Norton as the tortured Dr. Bruce Banner. Having already met with Fury, Stark offers his services as a consultant to General Thadeus “Thunderbolt” Ross, father of Banner/Hulk’s paramour Betty and the Hulk’s persistent and oft-thwarted antagonist.

In the “Iron Man” scene, Fury mentioned the “Avenger Initiative,” hinting at what would become the seminal 2012 “Avengers” team-up film. In the comics, the first opponent the Avengers faced was in fact an enraged and rampaging Hulk under the control of Thor’s adoptive brother Loki. Whereas comic book movies had heretofore been rather self-contained (or, at least, one character’s franchise rarely – if ever – interacted with another’s), they were now placed in



dialogue with one another. Superhero films were no longer singular works but rather constituent parts of a greater Text.

Barthes' work in essence laid the foundation for an upending of the artistic hierarchy — that false dichotomy of high and low culture — that had hobbled academic literary analysis for decades and enabled superhero comic books' relegation to the “childish things” bin: Eleven years after Barthes passed away, Sandman #19 – which featured an adaptation of Shakespeare's “A Midsummer Night's Dream” (including the title character, a superhero known as Sandman) – won a World Fantasy Award for best short story. No comic book had ever won such a prestigious honor. The win signaled that not only could the illustrations in comic books be considered art, but so too could the stories and adaptations themselves.<sup>82</sup> That Textual resistance to classification — surely, “A Midsummer Night's Dream” is not a “childish thing” — is another strand of DNA that superhero comic books share with Arthuriana.

Barthes said that “the Text cannot stop (for example, on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works),” while a work “can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogs, in exam syllabuses), the Text is a process of demonstration” (Barthes, 157). Work's domain is the library shelf (or the DVD rack). A Text's domain defies definition. A Text functions as a paradoxical and subversive force in regards to old classifications. A Text resists easy classification according to traditional categories and hierarchies: The more than 30 films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe span genres from historical drama to political thriller to high-stakes espionage to creature feature to character study to mind-bending science fiction. By Barthes' definition, a Text pushes the limits of readability and rationality – that MCU is supported by comic tie-ins, augmented reality games, television

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<sup>82</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 1:14:20

shows, and mountains of that meta-textual knowledge that has been built up over the last 80 years.

Both the Arthurian literary tradition and superhero comic books are marked by a phenomenon that emerges from the conception of a Text: social authorship. Social authorship is a nebulous concept by which the readers or audience become a part of the creative process, thereby culminating in what Barthes calls the “death of the author” in *From Work to Text*. Instead of a singular “genius” or “auteur,” it is instead the masses — the same masses who Payne decried as “idle, profligate, and vulgar” — who control the Text, as it moves from the writer’s desk and into the public sphere. Beyond the similarities shared between the forms and functions of the two bodies of work — Arthur and superhero comics — this commonality is striking in that it allows both Arthur and superheroes to transcend the page and enter into the realm of social consciousness to become something greater than the sum of its individual material works: a Text.

To wit: Within 50 years of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britannia, the story of King Arthur had been translated and redacted into several other continental languages, in prose and in verse. Each new language and new culture added new characters and episodes and interpretations. No merely written matter at that time could spread so fast — at least physically — because the advent of the printing press was still *three centuries away*. Something inherent to the story—its orality and authenticity—allowed it to spread by word of mouth and by popular imagination faster than it ever could have by written word. In today’s parlance, Arthur went viral. That is because Arthur, with origins in folk oral traditions, had already become a Text. Its authentic universal human truths, experiences, and unspoken dialogue transcended racial, social, national, cultural, religious, economic, and gender differences.

To speak of the body of Arthurian Text is to speak of works that consist of narrative verse, prose, metric verse, Romances, pre-modern, modern, post-modern, film, drama, music, and yes, comic books.<sup>83</sup> To speak of superheroes is to speak not just of comic books, which contain works of meta-fiction, satire, political commentary, philosophical meditation, adventure, romance, and transcendentalism, but also to speak of film, drama, music, and comedy. How, then, can one classify the Text Arthuriana or the Text of superhero comic books as any single thing? Works may be classified, yes, but not the Text.

The idea of the Text — which includes the ephemera and that which lies outside the margins of any particular work under the umbrella of a traditionally defined (i.e., written down) text — outlasts and has greater significance than any single particular work. Indeed, Barthes seems to have predicted the inclusion of ‘other’ forms of literature into the body of the Text, which he said “does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres.” The Text, according to Barthes, is “held in language” itself, in any medium, be it oral or written.<sup>84</sup>

This social consciousness — this meta-textual awareness and canon — is at the center of why some iterations of comic book superheroes — and of Arthur — just don’t work: Both Texts possess an ephemeral set of rules. In singular works, these rules may be violated, but these transgressions cannot change the larger Text. Like throwing a rock into a river may momentarily change the flow of water but not the course of the river itself, those aberrant forms are eventually either rejected or redacted to fit the larger Text.

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<sup>83</sup> Adam Beranek (w), Christian Beranek (w), Chris Moreno (a), Jay Fotos (a). Dracula Vs. King Arthur #1-2 (Oct.-Nov. 2005), Silent Devil Press; Mike W. Barr (w), Brian Bolland (p), Bruce Patterson, et al. (i). Camelot 3000 #1-12 (Dec. 1982-Apr. 1985), DC Comics.

<sup>84</sup> Barthes, 157

To whit: The Captain America of the 1950s had to be retconned into a false hero because fighting Communists was not seen as being “true” to the nature of a character who had fought such unquestionable evils as Adolf Hitler and his Nazis.

Also, consider Batman’s use of guns and his disdain for use of lethal force. A cornerstone of Batman’s canon is that, because his parents were murdered with a firearm, he does not use them to kill. Any depictions or suggestions of Batman using firearms or lethal force are heavily scrutinized and highly controversial.

Though Batman does use firearms in extreme situations during the seminal 1986 four-issue miniseries The Dark Knight Returns, he primarily uses rubber bullets, and when he does use live ammunition, it is mainly to distract enemies (in one panel where it appears he’s shot a villain in the head, but several pages later, that same villain appears alive and well — Batman merely shot the wall behind them). The books also contain two unequivocal quotes rejecting their use by Batman himself. As he moves through the bodies of Joker’s latest victims, his internal monologue says: “A gun is a coward’s weapon. A liar’s weapon. We kill too often because we’ve made it easy ... too easy ... sparing ourselves the mess and the work.” There is also a powerful moment where Batman snaps the wooden stock of a long gun in front of a vigilante inspired by him, admonishing the would-be hero: “*This* is the weapon of the *enemy*. We do not *need* it. We will not *use* it.”

In “Batman v. Superman” (2016), the second film of his DC Extended Universe, director Zack Snyder depicted his Batman — portrayed by Ben Affleck — as having no qualms about killing or using firearms, wiping out multiple henchmen with the heavy-caliber guns on his Batwing. The movie is the second-worst-reviewed Batman movie on RottenTomatoes.com,

beating out the reviled 1997 camp-fest *Batman & Robin*, starring George Clooney in the role of the Caped Crusader.

In 2019, Snyder addressed fans' reaction at a Q&A panel on his film "*Watchmen*" (2009) by saying, "Someone says to me: 'Batman killed a guy.' I'm like, 'F\*\*k, really? Wake the f\*\*k up.'"<sup>85</sup> Again in 2024, after Snyder's DCEU came to an inauspicious end after 16 films and a string of box office flops, Snyder responded to fans who continued to critique his more lethal version of Batman: "You're protecting your god in a weird way, right? You're making your god irrelevant if he can't be in that situation," Snyder said during an appearance on the "Joe Rogan Experience" podcast.

While Batman's aversion to lethal force and his abstaining from the use of firearms is seen as foundational and inviolate by the broader fan community — a crucial part of the Batman Text — it was in fact not until two years into his literary career that Batman first displayed a dislike for killing.<sup>86</sup> It wasn't until more than a year after *that* — following a hypothetical fable showing Batman getting involved in World War II, using a machine gun, and killing a boatload of soldiers using a crashing vehicle in *Batman* Vol. 1, No. 15 — that Batman would stop using deadly force. Kind of. He does bury KGBeast alive in *Batman* No. 420 in 1988 (eventually retconned), crushes a gangster with a pile of scrap cars in 1988's *Batman* No. 425, kills Dracula and a vampire-ized Joker in 1991's *Red Rain* maxi-series, and has killed in a couple of Elseworld (non-main-continuity) stories. He also used a gun firing a radion bullet to kill the nigh-immortal uber-villain Darkseid in the epic *Final Crisis* crossover storyline in 2009. The backlash against Snyder and the fact that these kills are so easy to list, however, show just how strongly the Text — and social authorship — operates on individual works.

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<sup>85</sup> Joe Rogan, host. "#2114 - Zack Snyder." *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Spotify. 6 March 2024. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3SJEjoGwc24YeGGeHgs4wH>

<sup>86</sup> Bill Finger (w), Bob Kane (p), Sheldon Moldoff (i, l), and Whitney Ellsworth (e). *Batman* #1 (March, 1940), DC Comics.

As for Arthur, in 2017, the big-budget, CGI-fueled “King Arthur: Legend of the Sword” reimagined Arthur (Charlie Hunnam) as a young adult grifter and street thief in a fictionalized medieval Londinium, before he’s whisked away to discover his royal origins, pull the sword from the stone, and defeat his evil uncle Vortigern en route to uniting Britain. Supposed to be the first entry in a planned six-film franchise reimagining the Arthurian tradition for modern audiences, “Legend of the Sword” was a box office bomb, failing to make back even its production budget, much less the money spent on its extensive marketing. Why? It was hardly recognizable as Arthur because it altered several key elements that were, like Batman’s no-kill rule, foundational to the Arthurian narrative. Most glaringly, Merlin is only name-checked, Guinevere is completely absent, and Arthur is raised in a brothel to be the equivalent of a Three Card Monty dealer in the back alleys, less an aspiring knight than a shifty Anglo Aladdin. More importantly, instead of an idealistic young Arthur redeeming his flawed father, it is Uther who comes off as the more sympathetic and heroic character — he does not conceive Arthur by trickery, and in fact nobly sacrifices himself so that his family may escape the clutches of his dastardly brother.

That the social authorship of the Texts of both superhero comic books and Arthuriana holds such strong influence across different media and genres is testament to these Texts’ resistance to classification. The Language in which Barthes says the Text is held does not necessarily have to refer to words, but to an understood discourse, a language of signs.

## ***Chapter 7: The Soil Where All Great Art is Rooted***

### **King Arthur, Superheroes, and Folktales**

*“Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. Wherever it is spoken by the fireside, or sung by the roadside, or carved into the lintel, appreciation of the arts that a single mind gives unity and design to, spreads quickly when its hour is come.”*

— **William Butler Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight***

The primary goal of folk *literature* is to commit folk oral traditions to written form in order to preserve them. In that respect, superhero comic books are not folk literature, in the strictest sense. However, insofar as they are recursively re-written to accommodate the ephemeral elements of the greater Text – thereby ensuring they cohere around central foundational truths invested in them by the culture from which they originate – then they most certainly resemble the manner in which Arthur and folktales or folk stories operate.

When rendered in traditional media (i.e. the forms used by the arbiters or guardians of academic discourse), folk stories can be co-opted, redacted, reduced, and appropriated. In effect, they become sterile and frozen. These stories are stored in the collective consciousness and transmitted by means that defy the constraints of traditional media.

With that in mind, comic books, while rendered in traditional media insofar as they are printed, were originally produced on newsprint – a fragile and temporary medium not intended for preservation. The earliest issues of Action Comics market Superman as “the most sensational strip character of all time,”<sup>87</sup> referring to his appearance in daily newspaper comic strips. During World War II, when many early superheroes were getting their starts, advertisements appeared on

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<sup>87</sup> Jerry Siegel (w), Joe Schuster (a). “Superman.” Action Comics #1 (June 1938), DC Comics.

the backs of those books that exhorted young readers to recycle paper for the war effort, and when the time came to recycle used paper, well, the President of DarkHorse Comics, Mike Richardson, remembers that “first thing Mom wanted to throw out were those damn comic books.”<sup>88</sup> Comics and their contents were never meant to exist for very long as printed matter, but to exist in the imaginations of readers, or at the very least provide momentary entertainment. Comic books and superheroes are part of a post-modern folk tradition, just as Arthur was part of a folk tradition before becoming a body of literature unto himself.

Just as Arthur came to live in the collective consciousness, so too have superheroes. In the past nine decades, Superman and his fellow capes have become part of a similar cultural discourse in the United States and even across the globe, and yet, they have only been permitted to exist on the periphery of academic discourse. Even this minor inclusion is granted begrudgingly by the likes of Bennett, Himmelfarb, and the *Washington Post*’s Jonathan Yardley, who cynically declared that “the good subjects for study already taken, they [professors of literature] have done the perfectly sensible thing and invented new subjects around which to construct their careers. This means that they must invest those subjects with academic legitimacy” (Levine, 253).

To say that comic books are an extension of the folktale tradition by virtue of the fact that they were originally presented via a disposable medium, however, is admittedly very much an incomplete assertion, because “folk” is not solely defined as “unpublished” or “unprinted.” Folktales are defined by more than just their orality or extra-textuality. They are an extension of the folk tradition because they are marked by the presence of what Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp called spheres of action.

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<sup>88</sup> 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.



While many in the 15 years since I turned in this work have asked if I used Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as part of my argument, a hero's journey is somewhat finite – it has a beginning, middle, and end. Yes, hero's journey narrative structures are present in single works or groups of works within the larger Texts of Arthuriana and superhero comic books, but that should be expected – compelling narratives are the building blocks of mythmaking. No, Arthur and superheroes must be examined through a wider lens, something less finite, something more fitting to their status as Texts.

In Propp's groundbreaking analysis of folktale conventions across cultural and linguistic boundaries, he posited that there are seven character functions—or “spheres of action”—which inhabit stories that are part of the folktale genre, and these character functions are very specific in the way that they function within the folktale milieu. They are each easily identifiable across both Arthurian and superheroic Texts.

## **The Villain**

The first sphere of action that Propp sets out is that of the villain. The sphere of action of the villain constitutes — naturally — acts of “villainy; a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero; (and) pursuit.”<sup>89</sup> In Arthuriana, this function is often carried out by multiple characters within the different traditions and tales. The most prominent of the villainous characters in Arthurian lore is Mordred. Though his relationship to Arthur varies from work to work, in nearly every formulation, he attempts to usurp Arthur's position as King and leads the final battle against Arthur's forces. Even before he was glossed as Arthur's illegitimate son – a product of incest – in later redactions, his name was associated with treachery and usurpation.<sup>90</sup> In nearly every formulation, the object of his pursuit – in the Proppian sense – is Arthur's throne. In some

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<sup>89</sup> Vladimir Propp. Morphology of the Folktale. Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968. pp. 79

<sup>90</sup> By the time Geoffrey pens Historia, there is already a tradition of the two as opposing forces, according to (Raymond H. Thompson. “Mordred.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.)

works, his villainous activities include claiming Guinevere for his own queen while Arthur is away questing for the Holy Grail. In the comic book arena, villains are likewise quite easily identified.

Superman's greatest foe, Lex Luthor, certainly engages in acts Propp would define as villainy, such as his various quests for economic or political domination and his willingness to put innocent people at risk for personal gain.<sup>91</sup> His fights with Superman are often by proxy (i.e. low-level henchmen or lackeys), however, on occasion, he has grappled with the Man of Steel in physical confrontation.<sup>92</sup> Luthor is characterized by his fanatical pursuit of Superman—he wants to drive the unwelcome alien from a world that he sees as his own. In short, he wants to drive the foreigner from his land and be seen as the hero himself.

## **The Donor**

The second sphere of action that Propp identifies is that of the Donor. This sphere involves the “preparation for the transmission of a magical agent; (and) provision of the hero with a magical agent” (Propp, 79). In Arthuriana, there exist two main contenders for this particular character function. Propp asserts that this splitting of character function can and does happen in folktale, so positing that this same split occurs in Arthuriana is a legitimate claim. The first such donor would obviously be Arthur's court wizard, Merlin, who assists both Arthur and his father Uther Pendragon by way of magic and sorcery. A figure who more accurately fits Propp's definition of (magical) donor would be the Lady of the Lake, who in a good portion of Arthurian tales gives Arthur the magical sword Excalibur — one of the trademarks of the character, and one of the most enduring pagan elements of a story that eventually became the

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<sup>91</sup> Jeph Loeb (w), Tim Sale (pencil), Bjarne Hansen (ink). Superman for All Seasons. Ed. Dale Crane. New York: DC Comics, 1999. pp. 96-97.

<sup>92</sup> Jeph Loeb (w), Ed McGuiness (p), Dexter Vines (i). “Public Enemies.” Superman/Batman #6 (March 2004), DC Comics.

exclusive property of a Christian society (a phenomenon which I will later discuss in great detail).

Going along with the theme of weaponry, Captain America's shield, the famous 2.5-foot, discus-shaped emblem of the Star Spangled Avenger, is in many ways (to be detailed later) a descendant of that unbreakable sword. Given its similarities to Excalibur (it is given to Steve Rogers in much the same way as Excalibur is given to Arthur by the Lady, it is unbreakable, and it serves as an emblem of the hero), and the fact that it is unable to be reproduced because of some "metallurgic accident" that created it, it can be seen as a product of modern magic (metallurgy and sword-making were long thought to be mystical arts by the uninitiated).<sup>93</sup> The round shield was given to Captain America in Captain America Comics #2 by President Franklin Roosevelt as a replacement for Cap's earlier, triangular shield, much as in some iterations, the Lady of the Lake gives Arthur a new or repaired Excalibur to replace the Sword in the Stone (which is or is not Excalibur, depending on the story).<sup>94</sup>

### **The Magical Helper**

The next sphere is that of the "(magical) helper." Propp's helper sphere includes the "spatial transference of the hero; liquidation of misfortune or lack; rescue from pursuit; the solution of difficult tasks; (and the) transfiguration of the hero" (Propp, 79). Arthur and his father Uther benefit from Merlin's spells, which include magical transportation and concealment. In the Marvel Universe, this role is often fulfilled by Dr. Stephen Strange, who uses his spells to conceal and magically transport various superheroes in order for them to accomplish their tasks,

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<sup>93</sup> Patrick Barta. "The Mysticism of Swords and Sword Making." Ed. Pavel Neumann. ArmArt: pattern-welded swords specialist: forged replicas of fully functional swords and edged weapons. ArmArt. 1 May 2008.

<sup>94</sup> The first appearance of the Sword in the Stone episode in Arthuriana is in the *Merlin* romance of Robert de Boron, written in 1200 C.E.

sometimes undetected.<sup>95</sup> In the DC Universe, this is very literally the sphere of the wizard Shazam, who transforms paper boy Billy Batson into the hulking Shazam.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Princess and Her Father**

The fourth sphere that Propp describes is that of the “Princess and her Father,” a unitary sphere that involves a love interest, their dominant parent, or both. The actions that fall within that sphere are to give the task to the Hero, to identify the False Hero/Usurper, to marry the Hero (in the case specifically of the “Princess” or the person being pursued or sought, usually a love interest), and to be the object of the hero’s search during the narrative. Propp noted that, functionally, the princess and the father cannot be clearly distinguished, and in some of the examples that I have discerned of this sphere of action, it is evident that Propp is still right, even decades later, though we must expand the definition to include more inclusive gender-neutral language. For instance: Wonder Woman is, herself, a princess (technically), but actually inhabits the Proppian role of the Hero. In her case (and in the case of other female-identifying superheroes), the “princess” could very well be a man, woman, non-binary, or not even a love interest. In the latter case, “marriage” could be taken to mean “unified with” or “reunited with.” In the Marvel superheroine America Chavez, we see all of these components through a modern lens: Her object of pursuit is her two mothers, who in sacrificing themselves to save their universe, inadvertently send their Latinx LGBTQ daughter on her quest: to traverse the Multiverse protecting other realities while trying to reassemble her mothers’ scattered particles and re-unite her family.

In the Arthurian text, the “princess and her father” are represented quite literally by Guinevere and her father, King Leodegrance. Guinevere marries Arthur at her father’s behest as

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<sup>95</sup> Jeph Loeb (w), Leinil Yu (a), Dave McCaig (colors/digital inks). “Denial.” Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America #1 (Apr. 2007), Marvel Comics.

<sup>96</sup> Bill Parker (w), C.C. Beck (a). Whiz Comics #2 (Feb. 1940), Fawcett Comics.

a form of treaty between the two kings,<sup>97</sup> though in the Auchinleck it doesn't take much convincing for the swooning princess to accept the offer of marriage to such a great warrior, who she witnesses displaying his prowess on the field of battle.<sup>98</sup> In post-Galfridian Arthur stories, part of this treaty includes the gifting of the most famous piece of furniture in all of literary history—the Round Table.<sup>99</sup>

In Superman, the action that Propp describes as identifying the False Hero is more fully fleshed out, as it is Lois Lane who identifies the falsity of the four Supermen who come to replace the real deal after Superman's apparent death at the hands of the creature Doomsday, and it is Lois who finds Superman's tomb empty before the arrival of the four Supermen, an unsubtle reference to the resurrection of Jesus in the Christian Bible.

However, comic book aficionados will note that it is not Lois alone who fulfills this action, though it is she who discovers that the four Supermen are not the real deal.<sup>100</sup> In a scene reminiscent of John 20:24-29 (the story of Doubting Thomas,) John Henry Irons (the hammer-wielding hero known as Steel), standing beside Lois in front of an emergent Superman, squeezes the black-clad figure's shoulder. Superman winces in pain, explaining that he's not back to full strength yet. He looks to Lois and attempts to prove who he is by using the phrase, "To Kill a Mockingbird," which Lois knows is Clark Kent's favorite movie. In this way, she reveals the true hero.<sup>101</sup>

## The Dispatcher

The fifth of Propp's spheres of action is that of the Dispatcher, the character who makes known a certain lack and sends the hero off on his quest. In Arthurian text, this is easily

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<sup>97</sup> Norris J. Lacy. "Leodegrance." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>98</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 5985-5994

<sup>99</sup> Norris J. Lacy. "Leodegrance." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>100</sup> Roger Stern (w), Jackson Guice (p), Denis Rodier (i). "An Eye for an Eye." *Action Comics* #688 (July, 1993), DC Comics.

<sup>101</sup> Dan Jurgens (w, p), Brett Breeding (i). "Resurrections." *Superman* #81 (Sept., 1993), DC Comics.

identifiable as Merlin, who enables Arthur's very conception and engineers his revelation as the one, true king. The lack, in this case, is the lack of a strong leader — a legitimate king — to unite all of England (or Britain, or Albion).

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

For Captain America, the Dispatcher is often the United States government, but just as often as not, he is the one who calls the shots for the super-team, the Avengers. Wonder Woman's Dispatcher would be her mother and mentor Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. It is she who sends her daughter to the world of men to return downed pilot Steve Trevor.

### **The Hero and the False Hero**

“Tell me to be what they want me to be  
Everybody thinks that it's so easy  
Sometimes it seems like there's two sides of me  
Everybody thinks it's so easy being me”

—**Plain White T's, *It's So Easy***

The next two spheres of action that Propp defines are the Hero — who reacts to the Donor, and who weds the Princess — and the False Hero/Usurper. The Hero is pretty easy: King Arthur fulfills this, as do all of the other superheroes in this discussion, in some form or fashion.

Propp's final sphere of action, though, is perhaps the richest in terms of the characters herein described. Propp describes the False Hero/Usurper as one who “takes credit for the hero's actions or tries to marry the princess” (Propp, 79). The character of Mordred – or Medraut – early on takes the mantle of Usurper. In Geoffrey's Historia, while King Arthur is taking an army

to the gates of Rome, Mordred is back in England marrying Guinevere without much resistance from the queen. He essentially takes over the throne until Arthur returns from his expedition to depose him. In later redactions, Mordred is very much an anti-Arthur, conceived by magic and deception as the result of incest between Arthur and his half-sister. He therefore would have a legitimate claim on the throne, being of royal blood on both sides. It is Arthur's denial of him in these redactions that touches off the war which consumes them both.<sup>102</sup>

Superman has no shortage of False Heroes throughout his Text: Bizarro (the backwards-talking, simple-minded, destructive inversion of the hero), the Four Supermen discussed above, Lex Luthor, and myriad others. Many of the most compelling villains in superhero comics are in fact forms of False Heroes/Usurpers, specifically in that they are characterized as dark mirrors of the Hero — what the Hero may have been had they made different choices, or were deprived of some crucial aspect of their psychological development, or simply had different luck. Spider-Man has Venom (and when Venom even becomes a type of anti-hero, he begets the even-more-savage Carnage); the Flash has Reverse Flash (a bit on the nose); the Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, has Sinestro, a former Green Lantern who uses the yellow ring of fear, rather than the green power ring of will; Thor has his brother Loki, the God of Mischief; and Captain America has the Red Skull: In many formulations, Johan Schmidt — the Red Skull's given name — took an early form of the Super Soldier Serum.

It can even be argued that The Winter Soldier — Captain America's World War II teenage sidekick Bucky Barnes, rescued from apparent death, brainwashed, and given a version of the Super Soldier Serum by the Soviets, then turned loose as a secret assassin — is a form of Mordred or a False Hero. However, soon after his resurrection as a character by Ed Brubaker in 2005, he is redeemed by his old friend and cured of the insidious brain washing. In that

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<sup>102</sup> Raymond H. Thompson. "Mordred." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

formulation, Bucky, interestingly enough, fulfills the function of the princess, rather than the False Hero.

One of the most prominent False Hero/Usurper in recent Captain America continuity is perhaps the one most ripe for discussion: The Grand Director.

After the apparent death of Steve Rogers in Captain America Vol. 4 #25, his paramour, Sharon Carter, is taken captive by Cap's greatest enemy: the Red Skull. Trapped in the Skull's compound, Carter wanders around looking for an escape route. On the last pages of Captain America Vol. 4 #36, she runs into a holding tank with a small window. Through the viewing port, she sees what looks like the healthy body of a hibernating Steve Rogers, despite the fact that events in previous issues had already established that the real Captain America's body was buried at sea to be protected by Namor, the Sub-Mariner.

At the end of Captain America Vol. 4 #37, the seemingly resurrected Rogers is lying in an anteroom covered by a hospital sheet. Thinking she's going to save her man, Sharon sneaks into the room and approaches the figure. "Steve...? Can you ... can you hear me?" she says. Groggily, the half-shadowed "Steve" says back, " ...what...? Who ... who's there...?" He sits up, revealing something that makes Sharon recoil in horror. On the final page of the issue, Carter looks at the still-half-shadowed figure, now seen in full with some sort of concealed skin injury on his left shoulder. Sharon steps back, "You're not—You're not Steve," she says. The awakening figure says, "Wait ... yes ... Steve ... Steve ... Rogers ... Yes. That was my name ...But ... who are you?"

The entire left side of this man's body is covered in what appears to be burns and scars. While he bears Rogers' face, he is not the genuine Steve Rogers. He is the Captain America of the 1950s, a failed revival of the character by Stan Lee, with Mort Lawrence and John Romita Sr.



in Young Men #24-28 (Dec. 1953-May 1954). Though that run of Captain America failed miserably and was soon canceled, comic book continuity had to somehow account for his existence. So, this character was retroactively identified as a false pretender to the title of Captain America, a man named William Burnside who idolized the real Cap to the point of obsession. The history teacher who would eventually become this False Hero is so obsessed that he attains a Ph.D. in American History, writes a thesis on the life of Captain America (a bit unsettling, but I promise I won't be dressing up in spandex any time soon!), and researches Project: Rebirth, revealing the real identity of Captain America and the lost Super Soldier formula. He legally changes his name to Steve Rogers, undergoes surgery to alter his voice and appearance, and angles to become the next Captain America during the Korean War.<sup>103</sup>

The problem with this new “Steve Rogers” is that the serum he ingested was unstable, having traumatic psychotic effects. The United States government put the 1950s Cap into suspended animation, until he is awakened decades later by the villainous Dr. Faustus (Skull's eventual partner in the Death of Captain America story arc and one of Sharon Carter's jailers). Faustus turns Burnside into The Grand Director, the leader of a Neo-Nazi group called the Natural Force. Eventually defeated by Captain America, he apparently incinerates himself (maybe his name should have been Freddie Foreshadowing?).<sup>104</sup> It was the scars from those burns that clued-in comic fans were able to see as indications of this new Steve's identity because they were aware of the larger Text.

The folk nature of comic book superhero stories illustrated above demonstrates how a very real modern mythology has grown up around them in much the same fashion as it did around Arthur, whose stories moved freely from the folk realm to that of literature and back

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<sup>103</sup> Steve Englehart (w), Sal Buscema (p), and Jim Mooney (i). “Hero or Hoax?” Captain America Vol. 1 #153-156 (Sept. 1972-Dec. 1972), Marvel Comics.

<sup>104</sup> Al Milgrom (i) and Keith Pollard (p). Captain America Vol. 1 #232-236 (Apr. 1979-Aug. 1979), Marvel Comics.

again, over and over, without the impediment of the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. Ideas born in the public consciousness have come to be integral parts of what authorities in both genres consider canonical within their respective spheres.

By linking the post-modern emergence of comic book superheroes as central figures of a new mythology to the mythos of King Arthur, a new and very exciting theory of historical transmission emerges, one which binds high and low culture and literature together not in a continuum or a cycle, but as a single unit. Arthur is the bridge, the key ingredient in these comic book superheroes that separates them from the mere strongmen and gods of ancient tales and certifies their inclusion into a body of “alternative” texts that should be included in the canon of high culture’s literature. In the end, it is not King Arthur himself—whether that self be the historical or the literary character—who is being resurrected or revived as per the “Once and Future King” trope, but rather the larger Arthurian tradition of folk literature, the way that the greater Text is formed both on and off the page, and the crucial role that social authorship plays in the conception of both lordly Arthuriana and “lowly” comic book superheroes.

The character — the figure — of King Arthur, too, stands as a significant turning point in the formulation of today’s superheroes. As heirs to the idea of the Once and Future King — that the great hero will somehow, some day, return to save us in our hour of need — their inheritance is not one of selfishness, cynicism, divine monarchy, or classist hierarchy; but rather, their inheritance is one of hope, a hope that survives in the social consciousness of collaborative authorship and ownership.

In 2016, in the wake of one of the most divisive national elections in American history, fascism saw a frightening surge in popularity, as did dehumanization of the Other. Into this world, Marvel released Captain America: Steve Rogers #1. In the closing pages, Steve Rogers

sends former sidekick Rick Jones to his death by pushing him out of an airplane. With dark clouds behind him, Rogers frowns and grimly utters two words that would touch off a firestorm of debate, fury, and indignation among fans: “Hail Hydra.”<sup>105</sup> This began a story arc entitled “Secret Empire,” where Steve Rogers is revealed to have apparently been an agent of the villainous organization Hydra all along. Worse yet: He wasn’t a sleeper agent or under hypnosis; he was a true believer.

The reactions were swift and practically unanimous: The shock and betrayal were felt so deeply and so widely (actor Chris Evans, who portrayed Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, tweeted: “Hydra?!?!? #sayitaintso”) that the story arc became national news.<sup>106</sup> Cap had fought Hitler; he was created by Jews; he turned in his stars and stripes when the American government abandoned democratic tenets; he resisted the Superhuman Registration Act because it infringed on the civil liberties of a minority population. There was no way, the public cried, that he could ever be a neo-fascist throwing in his lot with a group of Nazis. It is eventually revealed that Captain America’s villainous turn was the result of a reality-altering MacGuffin — known as a Cosmic Cube — gaining sentience and creating a divergent timeline with its own Hydra-believing Cap, who would eventually be defeated by the real Steve Rogers. Yet, the outcry at the outset of the storyline speaks to the significance of the figure of Captain America that exists in the collective consciousness, the one who was depicted as socking Adolf Hitler on the jaw on the cover of his first appearance. They were by very definition a folk tradition, and Arthur a folk hero of his own body of folktales.

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<sup>105</sup> Nick Spencer (w), Jesus Saiz (a), and Joe Caramagna (c). “Secret Empire” Captain America: Steve Rogers Vol. 1 #1 (Dec. 2016), Marvel Comics.

<sup>106</sup> Riesman, Abraham Josephine. “That Time Captain America Said ‘Hail Hydra’ and Geekdom Imploded.” *Vulture*, 28 Apr. 2019, [www.vulture.com/2019/04/marvel-hydra-captain-america-nick-spencer.html](http://www.vulture.com/2019/04/marvel-hydra-captain-america-nick-spencer.html).

## *Chapter 8: Signs and Wonders*

### Investment of Meaning in the Text's Language of Signs

“As a symbol, I can be incorruptible. I can be everlasting.”

#### **—Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in “Batman Begins” (2008)**

As he sits in a private jet with faithful butler Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine), Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne lays out his reasons for becoming a masked vigilante, a figure that will become known as The Batman. This thesis statement at the start of the second act of Christopher Nolan's “Batman Begins” (2008) sets the stage for the entire Dark Knight Trilogy — Batman as a symbol resists the Joker's overtures, and Batman as a figure endures, even after Wayne's apparent death.

While Batman may not seem to have Powers in the sense Coogan defines them — Ben Affleck's Batman says his superpower is just being super rich in 2017's “Justice League” — he is a preternaturally skilled hand-to-hand combatant, detective, and strategist to the point where popular genre hub [IGN.com](http://www.ign.com) ran a wildly popular feature series called “Use Your Delusion” in the early 2000s, in which readers game out how Batman would defeat anyone and anything. In the series, readers rationally explain how Batman would best the [New England Patriots of Tom Brady's heyday](#), the [history of psychiatry](#), the [entire genre of hip hop](#), the [sun](#), the [ocean](#), Superman, the entire Justice League, and even more preposterous opponents.

Yes, even though he's just a mortal man, you'd have a hard time convincing anyone that Batman doesn't count as a member of the Arthurian superhero lineage. If anything, he's closer to Arthur than almost all of the heroes mentioned herein, in that he was born into privilege, lost both his parents, spent much of his youth learning abroad as a commoner, and relies on his

strategic acumen and the tools of a trade to combat those who prey on the innocent. The leathery wings of a bat and those of the royal Pendragon flap to the same beat, if you consider the whole of Batman's Text, and the whole of Arthur's.

The Text, Barthes writes, is approached and experienced all in reaction to the sign, whereas a work closes in on a signified. Because of this, the work can only function in two modes of signification: Either the signified can be claimed to be evident or it can be considered secret, "something to be sought out." In the first case, the work becomes the object of a literal science, which is to say that it can be dissected and its meaning deduced. In the second case, the work then falls "under the scope of a hermeneutics, of an interpretation."

Instead of falling prey to strict definitions of meaning or subjective and vague interpretation, a Text participates in the infinite deferment of these signs, of the signified. Because of its vastness and complexity, instead of having finite levels of signification, a Text has a multi-dimensional web of signification. The Text, says Barthes, dilates the signified. Where the work functions as a "general sign" that itself functions within the civilization that produces the sign, the Text — because it cuts across works and genres — takes as its field the signifier, which "must not be conceived of as 'the first stage of meaning', its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its deferred action" (Barthes, 158).

Take, for example, the concept of the Once and Future King. In reference to King Arthur, it is simultaneously frozen, yet somehow unstuck in time. Yes, Arthur's story is set in the midst of a remote period of history — in a culture and a society that we cannot know — and yet, somehow, it is as evocative today as it was back then.

To be able to understand such distant cultures as the ones from which Arthur emerged in the fifth and sixth centuries of the Common Era, "the interpreter must be able to select or to

fashion ... units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention” (Greenblatt, 26). The Arthur Text has done that for us, in the forms of its constituent elements — the sword, the battles, and the four roles. It is remote, yet still prescient, despite the fact that while that supposed promise of Arthur’s return was made centuries ago, it has still not come to pass, and has in fact been invested with even greater, more abstract meaning — meaning that has allowed it to dilate to include his super heroic descendants. It is the ultimate deferral, not unlike the New Testament’s continual negotiation — through the Gospels — of the Second Coming. As the years passed and the promise of Jesus’s return became more and more remote in time, the writers of the later Gospels had to keep deferring and renegotiating its terms.<sup>107</sup>

Comic books, following Barthes’ conception of a Text, constantly engage in this renegotiation, particularly in regards to boundaries in a world defined by them. The foreign captivity that spawns Tony Stark’s transformation into Iron Man has slid through both time and space over the decades, going from Vietnam in the 1960s to a more nebulous conflict to Afghanistan and the War on Terror in the 21st century.

One of those boundaries — death — is renegotiated so often that it is almost — no pun intended — comical. It was long held as an axiom among comic book fans that no one in comics stays dead except for Bucky (Captain America’s kid sidekick during World War II), Jason Todd (the second Robin, killed off by fans by a telephone vote), and Uncle Ben (Peter Parker’s father figure, and the first to say, “With great power, there must also come great responsibility.”). But, as has been proven over and over again, even with the first two members of this trinity, no one ever stays dead in comic books. There’s always a clone, some magic spell, some fortuitous

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<sup>107</sup> Steven Goldsmith. "Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels." University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Berkeley, CA. 13 Apr. 2007.

accident, a time travel bubble, or divine resurrection. The meanings of the signifier (i.e. death) are continually renegotiated and dilated to create a perpetual web of signification.

Because of this, the Text is “plural” — not in terms of material quantity, but rather in the fact that it does not answer to a single interpretation. This is not to say that the Text is ambiguous, mind you. To paraphrase Whitman, they are vast, and they contain multitudes — if works contradict themselves or each other, the Text is nevertheless true to itself. It has what Barthes calls a “stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers” (Barthes, 159). The Text is a fabric, “entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes: cultural languages (what language is not cultural?), antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony” (Barthes, 60). There is constant and irreducible interplay between the meanings of the signifiers so that there is, in a sense, constant motion, a wave of meaning that ripples through the Text. The Text is “multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives,” (Barthes, 159) in a sense, predicting Barthes’ later work, *Death of the Author*, in which it is not the creator who posits meaning, but later readers and redactors. The continual cycling of writers and creators through the worlds of comic books and Arthuriana, along with the unique role that fans and readers play in determining what is “canonical” in both — which will be explored in further detail later — supports labeling comic books and Arthuriana as Texts, and their constituent pieces as works.

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

American literary critic Barbara Johnson<sup>108</sup> claims that previous historical distinctions made between the two literary techniques of metaphor and metonymy are in fact nonexistent, that both metaphor and metonymy are two sides of the same coin. Speech—and thereby expression—cannot function with one and without the other. They are not interchangeable, but cultural and societal association (metonymy) and analytical association (metaphor) cannot exist without one another. Writes Johnson: “the reduction ... has as its necessary consequence aphasia, silence, the loss of the ability to speak.” And without the dialogue within and between the respective Texts of comic book superheroes and Arthuriana, there would be no premise for any kind of historical transmission by any means.

The assertions that Johnson makes speak to the connection between the enchanted sword(s) used by King Arthur and the discus-shaped shield wielded by Captain America, a “once and future” soldier not unlike Mallory’s Arthur (owing to the years he spent frozen in Arctic ice). Both Cap’s shield and Arthur’s sword(s) are seen as nigh indestructible, made of metal rendered so by magical or alchemical intervention; and both serve as symbols for the two heroic figures. Captain America’s shield echoes the design of his costume, and has been emblazoned on t-shirts, lapel pins, tie clips, golf club covers, socks, underwear, notebooks, and thousands of other retail items. Arthur, though associated with a heraldic dragon on his shield in medieval Arthuriana, was connected with a magical sword from a far earlier point. Throughout the centuries, a distinctive gold-hilted sword — which we will detail later — is as representative of King Arthur as any other icon.

But there are, too, some important differences. The first is that Excalibur stands for the right to rule. The sword is a metonymic representation of royal power (the figurative Sword

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<sup>108</sup> “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God.” Black Literature and Literary Theory. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Methuen, 1984. 205-219.



Temporal, as it were) and the right to rule Britain. The shield, on the other hand, is a metaphor for America's rhetorical preference for peace as shown in the Great Seal of the United States: the eagle turning towards the olive branch in one set of talons, and away from the arrows it clutches in the other. It is a defensive tool, as opposed to Excalibur, which is a weapon of offense.

However, Johnson's assessment that metaphor and metonymy are in fact operating in concert, that the two are *not* mutually exclusive and are in fact both required to perform speech, deepens the connection between the two martial tools. The change may seem slight, but so too does an adamant sword look thin and delicate when viewed edge-on.

Instead of just being a metonymic object, Excalibur is also a metaphor for the battles which a Warrior King must fight to gain the right to rule. The sword becomes a metaphor for offense, in much the same way the shield is a metaphor for defense. Along with the shield being just such a metaphor for the aspirational defensive posture of the United States, it is also metonymic, as it resembles the hero himself, with his red, white, and blue costume. One cannot make the connection between these important themes of the two weapons without either metonymy or metaphor. The two methods do not describe the same significance in relation to either one of the objects, but they describe different parts of the mythos surrounding each weapon which cannot operate without one another.

Excalibur itself may be a symbol of kingship and right to rule, but without Arthur, the Warrior King who pulls it from the stone,<sup>109</sup> it cannot stand for success in battle or the unification of Britain for which Arthur, the nebulous historical figure as well as the literary hero, is remembered for.

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<sup>109</sup> The first instance of this being a test of kingship is in Robert de Boron's *Merlin*. De Boron explained that the sword represented justice (i.e. the Sword Temporal) and the stone itself represented Christ, thereby establishing King Arthur as a defender of Christianity and as king by divine right. (Norris J. Lacy. "Sword in the Stone." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.)

Captain America's shield functions as an aspirational reference to the defensive posture of the United States, but without the man behind the shield, whose very attire is a reflection of the decoration of that shield, it is merely an object. The shield is representative of the hero, in that *he* also functions as a shield, as America's defense against foes domestic (terrorists and home-grown fascists and extremists), foreign, and otherwise (as leader of the Avengers, Captain America has defended the earth from alien invasions).

In a sense, the weapons cannot function as coherent speech acts (they cannot convey that which they do) without either their metaphorical aspects or their metonymic aspects. In fact, Coogan's MPIC conventions which define superheroes cannot operate — specifically the Identity and Costume/Chevron elements — without the combination of metaphor and metonymy.

Aside from metonymy, Barthes cites as a characteristic of the Text as opposed to the Work the fact that the text is “radically symbolic.” Well, what is it to be radically symbolic? Barthes uses this term in relation to “moderately symbolic,” which is a characteristic of the Work. The symbolism of the work runs out and comes to a halt. Because a work is restrictive, it does not offer the limitless procession of interpretation that a Text does. Works may have several meanings, but those readings and symbols are finite. A Text “accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural” (Barthes, 159).

The beauty of a Text as Barthes defines it, especially in light of this project, is that other than its irreducibly plural meaning, it requires that the reader “try to **abolish** (or at the very least to diminish) the **distance between writing and reading**, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but **by joining them in a single unifying practice**” (Barthes, 162) (emphasis my own). Because of this a Text is left open to be continually re-written over and over again by any number of potential readers and writers. Sound familiar? It

should, because comic book superhero stories — largely because of the financial implications of successful characters — outlast their creators, either professionally or posthumously. In the comic book world, it would seem, whatever sells can be left open, and eventually, after seven decades or so, you can fill a stadium with the people who have worked on the character. But the realities of the comic book industry are that the books themselves don't sell as well as they used to. In fact, comic books themselves are one of the smallest portions of a comic book company's overall bottom line. They sell Halloween costumes, apparel, art prints, limited-edition prop replicas, films, and action figures, which young children (including yours truly once upon a time) play with, writing in their imaginations the stories that they may just write 20 years down the road, when they become writers and illustrators for the comic book industry. The greatest ware comic book companies produce are not the works—the individual comics—but the Text of their proprietary superheroes.

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

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

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

Those who deal with Arthur claim that the Arthurian has been revived in a self-consistent and self-referential mode. The “most significant “return” of Arthur has been not in particular accounts of his second coming but in the revitalization of the entire body of Arthurian material.” That revival is due to this intertextuality and this particular characteristic of the Text—that it lacks closure.<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, each part of the greater Text—each constituent work—is held with a certain degree of intertextuality, according to Barthes. Each individual is “the text-between of another text ... not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas” (Barthes, 160). It does not have to conform to the work of a single author. In fact, Barthes mentions in an aside, “the ‘*droit d’auteur*’ or copyright’, (is) in fact of recent date since it was only really legalized at the time of the French Revolution” (Barthes, 161).

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

“Many scholars, including D.K. Crowne, have proposed the idea that the poem was passed down from recitation to recitation under the theory of Oral-Formulaic Composition, which hypothesizes that epic poems were (at least to some extent) improvised by whoever was reciting them.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Stephen R. Reimer and Raymond H. Thompson. “Legend of Arthur’s Return.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

<sup>111</sup> Lord, Albert. The Singer of Tales. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960. pp. 200

Whereas the work is understood to be traceable to a source (through a process of derivation or “filiation”), the Text is without a source—the “author” is a mere “guest” at the reading of the text.<sup>112</sup> The Text “reads without the inscription of the Father” or the Auteur. It is rather the *lack* of clarity on that account that most informs the later literary development of the Text.<sup>113</sup>

This is a hallmark of the Arthurian tradition, which began as Welsh oral tradition in the late sixth century and was only written down much later. Since then, many authors have had their hands in the Arthurian soup, and have each added their own flavors to it, but none have altered its basic ingredients. Arthur has outlived all of these authors and has evolved on his own—as a Text—through an almost organic or biological process. Arthur has taken on a life of his own separate from those who may claim to have created certain elements of the story. This concept of social authorship is integral to the similarities between the Arthurian tradition and contemporary comic book norms and cultural significance.

While a work is a commodity—an object of consumption, like the single comic book or an edition of Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur—the Text narrows the distance between reading and writing by replacing this consumption with the free play of collaborative reading. The reader gains pleasure without separation from the Text; in fact, the reader is a *part of it*. This is where comic fans get their vicarious kicks from watching Robert Downey Jr. zoom around Malibu in his sleek, hot-rod-red Iron Man suit, or seeing Brandon Routh’s Superman break through the clouds and into the sunlight, red cape fluttering in the wind. Comic book fans understand that because they have the power of the purse, they can pass judgment on how the custodians of their favorite properties are performing, and — if talented enough — they can even

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<sup>112</sup> Barthes, 161

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

take over those custodians' jobs themselves. This resonance that comic book superheroes have off the page—they are not solely what is or has been drawn into comic book frames, but much, much more—is yet another telltale folkloric trait they share with the Text of King Arthur.

## Part 3: Secret Origin

I'm waiting for my Lady of the Lake  
To come and crown me king  
I'm waiting for my rocket to land  
So I can get my power ring  
I'm waiting for my radioactive meteorite to fall  
I'm waiting but I ain't got no meteorite at all  
I'm waiting for my story to begin  
I'm waiting for my... I'm not done  
Don't count me out of it—  
My story isn't over yet

– Ookla the Mok, *Secret Origin*

## *Chapter 9: Analyzing the Ancestors*

Much of the scholarship done on comic book superheroes can be said to have been focused primarily around a single remark made by Superman creator Jerome Siegel about how he hit upon the idea of Superman: "I'm lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so."

In order to understand King Arthur's place and function as the pivot point where the heroic became the superheroic, we have to truly understand how what came before shaped Arthur into that pivotal figure.

Modern cultural anthropologists, philosophers, and literary scholars must continually renegotiate the past's own cache of meaning and significance, because without it, the present has no significance. Without the present, naturally, the past has no reason to be recalled. The past informs the present, but the present moment also constantly gives new layers of relevance and meaning to the past. The connection between the present and the past is key for the understanding of how Arthur informs on modern superheroes, and more significantly, how the relationship between the two informs a theory of historical transmission of the things in the air—the hearsay that Texts like Arthur become.

A good starting point for this, suggested by Siegel's quote, would be DC Comics' superhero Shazam (formerly known as Captain Marvel), whose name – and the word that transforms him from paperboy Billy Batson into the hulking hero – is an acronym for powers tied to Classical and Biblical figures: **S** stands for the wisdom of King **Solomon**; **H** stands for the strength of **Hercules**; **A** stands for the stamina of **Atlas**, who bore the world on his shoulders,



much as many comic book superheroes do in abstract; **Z** stands for the power of **Zeus**<sup>114</sup>; The second **A** stands for the courage of **Achilles**, the great Greek demigod hero of the Siege of Troy; and **M** stands for the speed of **Mercury**, the Messenger of the Gods. He is granted these powers in Whiz Comics #2, in order to become earth's mightiest mortal and battle the seven deadly enemies of man: Pride, Envy, Greed, Hatred, Laziness, Selfishness, and Injustice.

These gods and heroes of old mentioned within the epithet of Shazam draw from the same Hellenistic tradition from which Alexander the Great drew his mythical power in the public eye, and from which later writers would draw Arthur's heroic lineage (see: Chapter 6, Aeneas of Troy → Brutus → Arthur). As the progenitors of both Rome and of Britain—Aeneas and Brutus, respectively—emerged from the fires of a falling Ilium, it makes sense to start with the hero who helped tip the scales for the Greeks against the Trojans: Achilles.

In Homer's Iliad, Achilles is the most handsome and the quickest of the Greek heroes assembled to fight Troy. His fury and rage in battle were so great and powerful that the gods themselves feared he would change the course of fate and bring the fall of Troy sooner than they had decreed. His armor, forged after the death of his male lover Patroclus, was created by the god Hephaestus at the urging of Achilles' mother, the sea nymph Thetis. Homer describes the circular Shield of Achilles (evocative now of Captain America's discus-shaped implement) in great detail in Book 18, lines 468-607. Hephaestus adorned it with designs and symbols, including constellations and stars, so that it represents all that Achilles is, and all he aspires to be (again, not unlike Cap's red, white, and blue shield centered around a star):

And the bellows, twenty in all, blew upon the melting-vats, sending forth a ready blast of every force, now to further him as he labored hard, and again in whatsoever way Hephaestus might wish and his work go on. And on the fire he put stubborn bronze and

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<sup>114</sup> Though he would not debut until more than 30 years later, there is a comparison to be noted between the powerful Greek god and the Norse god-turned-superhero Thor. In fact, during the landmark Marvel vs. DC crossover event in the mid-1990s, Shazam (then going by the name Captain Marvel) faces off with Thor in a one-on-one slugfest, but before they strike the first blows, they kneel and pray – together – for the future of mankind, as their universes continue to catastrophically collide.

tin [475] and precious gold and silver; and thereafter he set on the anvil-block a great anvil, and took in one hand a massive hammer, and in the other took he the tongs. First fashioned he a shield, great and sturdy, adorning it cunningly in every part, and round about it set a bright rim, [480] threefold and glittering, and therefrom made fast a silver baldric. Five were the layers of the shield itself; and on it he wrought many curious devices with cunning skill. Therein he wrought the earth, therein the heavens therein the sea, and the unwearied sun, and the moon at the full, [485] and therein all the constellations wherewith heaven is crowned...

The great Greek hero was known for his speed, his stamina, his strength, and his rage, but also for his pride, for it is because of his pride that the gods decreed that he should perish.

Achilles was petty and argumentative, and refused to take the field with his Myrmidons after feeling slighted by Agamemnon, the general of the Greek host. It is only after his friend/lover Patroclus is slain by the Trojan hero Hector that Achilles re-enters the fight and nearly wins the war single-handedly.

In varying traditions, Achilles is depicted as both mortal and immortal. In the incomplete first-century C.E. poem *Achilleis* by Statius, Achilles gains invulnerability when his mother dips him in the waters of the River Styx, but she forgets to wet his infamous heel. However, no sources before Statius refer to Achilles' otherwise-invulnerable nature or the weak heel, and it is mentioned nowhere in Homer's *Iliad*. In fact, in Book 21, Homer mentions that Asteropaeus, a Paeonian hero, wounds Achilles' elbow with a spear sometime before his demise. The vulnerability of Achilles' Heel is a late addition to the lore, but it has nevertheless become an integral part of it, much as the story of Sir Lancelot was a relatively late addition to the Arthur mythos, and yet has become synonymous with it, or how the power of flight was a late addition to the Superman story.

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

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

The son of the sea nymph Thetis and the mortal king Peleus, Achilles had one foot in the world of man, and another in the world of the divine. The same can be said for Hercules, who was born of the union between a god and a mortal. To burnish his own burgeoning legend, Alexander promulgated the rumor that he too was the product of such a union. Furthermore, he claimed descent from Achilles himself through his own mother Olympia, who was descended from the kings of Epirus, who in turn claimed to be descended from Achilles' son.

But both Hercules and Achilles, though, were powerless when compared to the divine parentage from which they sprang. So, why, one might ask, are the great Greco-Roman gods not the influences for modern superheroes? They perform even more impressive feats than their progeny, Hercules and Achilles, and are nigh invulnerable — a trait we have come to expect from superheroes like Superman and Shazam. But in fact it is in that invulnerability that they fail as heroic models. No god of Greece could be heroic because they were immortal and invulnerable. They could not defy danger. Hercules and Achilles could because they were half-mortal. So when we speak of ancient or classical heroes, it is not to speak of the gods (even poor Mercury, whose winged helmet and heels inspired DC's The Flash and Marvel's Namor the

Sub-Mariner, respectively), despite what some comic book villains have to say about it. Heroes, and superheroes, are those characters who can defy possibility of mortal danger. Hercules and Achilles could defy danger as well, but they crucially lacked a prosocial Mission. They are largely out for themselves and are merely heroic figures

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

Thor was worshiped widely by early Germanic peoples and in Scandinavia, he was in fact worshiped more than his father, Odin. By many accounts, he was the most powerful of the Scandinavian and Germanic gods. So how is this seemingly all-powerful thunder god considered heroic? Because of the concept of Ragnarök, in Norse, the “Doom of the Gods.” Thor is said to battle Jörmungand, the world serpent and the symbol of evil, at the time of Ragnarök because he failed to fully smash the creature’s skull in their first encounter. Because of the concept that the gods can die, and that Thor could not completely destroy his great enemy, he has mortality and he has flaws.

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

Like Hercules and Achilles before him, Thor is also of divine lineage. Nigh immortal, but not completely. The problem thus far with tracing modern superheroes directly to these early

Norse and Greco-Roman heroic traditions has been that none of these aforementioned heroes are more than half human. But what about Siegel's other father figure for the character of Superman, the Hebrew strongman Samson?

He possessed no such pedigree as Hercules, Achilles, or Thor, but was rather a Nazarite, one set aside for God "by a vow to abstain from strong drink, from shaving or cutting the hair, and from contact with a dead body." Because of this vow, he was gifted with tremendous physical strength, enough for him to kill a lion with his bare hands. Like Hercules and Achilles, though, he proves to be less than morally upright. He broke his vow several times over when he feasted with a gentile, solicited a prostitute, and – when drunk – revealed the secret of his strength (his uncut hair) to Delilah.

Like Achilles' unfortunate heel, Samson had the 'one weakness,' a tradition that would follow Superman (kryptonite) and the Green Lantern (originally, wooden objects were immune to the power of Alan Scott's mystical ring, though the rings bestowed on the later sci-fi-inspired Green Lantern Corps were instead ineffective against yellow objects).<sup>115</sup> Samson is one of the last of the progressively more and more ineffectual Judges. It is because of his failure that the people of Israel clamor to have a king like the other nations around them. God reluctantly grants their wish, having wanted them to remain separate and distinct from the gentile peoples surrounding them. The final Judge, Samuel, anoints Saul – the handsome and charismatic son of Kish – as Israel's first king.

In what Coogan calls the superheroic prehistory, we have immortal gods who cannot be heroic (i.e. acting with intention for the benefit of others, despite understanding that such action will mean facing great personal risk or danger) and morally imperfect hybrids. How can these

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<sup>115</sup> The ineffectiveness of the Green Lantern power rings against yellow was revealed in *Green Lantern: Rebirth* #3, "Yellow," (2005) to be due to a so-called "yellow impurity," a consequence of the avatar of fear – Parallax – being trapped within the central green power battery on Oa – the battery that powers the rings of the entire Corps.

figures possibly serve as the common ancestors to comic book superheroes, who are – by definition – heroic and are driven by a pro-social mission? There had to be a monumental shift in heroic storytelling tradition – a game changer. After all, dinosaurs didn't turn into birds overnight;<sup>116</sup> they had to evolve before they took flight.

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<sup>116</sup> Singer, Emily. "How Dinosaurs Shrank and Became Birds." *Quanta Magazine*, Simons Foundation, June 12, 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-dinosaurs-shrank-and-became-birds/>. *Scientific American*, Apr. 16, 2024.

## ***Chapter 10: Of Arthour and of Merlin***

### **How the Auchinleck Manuscript Puts King Arthur in Dialogue With Previous Examples of Kingship**

As heroic narratives marched on, the world got smaller. The narrative emphasis shifted from niche cultural heroes like the early Hebrew judges and the pagan gods and their familiars to stories of godly heroes in a world dominated by Christian monotheism. This new breed of heroic figure was tempted by vice and greed — as the previous heroic characters were — but also had to negotiate a new religious status quo, as well as the emergence of multinational states governed by monarchs who vested the legitimacy of their rule in divine right. This was the world in which a group of scribes and editors in London of 1330 embarked on an ambitious project.

It had been 300 years since the Norman conquest of 1066, when William the Conqueror defeated the Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson, and as those three centuries of Norman influence came to a head, political tensions boiled over. A reaction to all things Norman meant that Norman influences were being worked out of wider English culture, and the idea of a distinct English language and a distinct English culture was beginning to take hold.<sup>117</sup>

In her London Bookshop Theory (which gave rise to all current scholarship on the Auchinleck), Laura Hibbard Loomis posited that this group set out to compile a central repository of English literary canon that would be representative of the ideals, values, language, and heritage of a Britain without Norman influence. Loomis set out the now-widely held belief that the project of the Auchinleck's compilation was a politically-motivated one, set on

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<sup>117</sup> “English language.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 Apr., 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-74811>>.

establishing a national language and a national cultural identity by creating a sort of national library in that new national tongue.<sup>118</sup>

Thus, the chief editor of the Auchinleck – Scribe One – sought to not only legitimize English rule of England, but to do so through one of the most ubiquitous and popular heroes of all time: King Arthur. The longest and most complete single work in the entire manuscript – penned by none other than Scribe One himself – is *Of Arthour and of Merlyn*. At nearly 10,000 lines, it eats up pages from the back of the 201st folio to the front of the 256th, far surpassing the piece at the center of Loomis’ theory – *Guy of Warwick* – which appears first composed in couplets, ranging from ff. 108ra (front side, first column) to 146vb (back side, second column), followed by the stanzaic version of the same story, which stretches from ff. 145vb to ff. 167rb.

There were just a few problems: Not only was Arthur a thoroughly international superstar at this point – with various other nations adding their own traditions to the Arthurian canon – but Arthur at his core was so deeply firmly rooted in pagan folk stories that even the mainstream Arthurian canon – chiefly Geoffrey’s *Historia* – rhetorically vested Arthur’s legitimacy as king in his filial relationship to the pagan founders of Rome. Yet, instead of dismissing Arthurian tradition as unworthy of inclusion because of centuries of foreign redaction, or for its base popularity among the masses, or for its roots on the “primitive” margins in Celtic and Welsh mythology, this endeavor to establish an English literary canon was *centered* around Arthur precisely *because* the character was so broadly popular and deeply embedded in the popular consciousness, enjoying ubiquity and cultural awareness of a kind unseen by any story outside of the Bible.

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<sup>118</sup> Loomis, Laura Hibbard. “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340.” *Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962. First published in PMLA (the publication of the Modern Language Association of America) 57 (1942): 595-627.



The brobdingnagian 9,764-line version of *Of Arthour and of Merlyn* that appears in the Auchinleck arrived neither particularly early nor particularly late in the formation of Arthurian tradition. *Of Arthour and of Merlyn* itself – which exists in four other collections, none of which have the Auchinleck’s detail or level of completeness – is not one of the central works of Arthuriana like Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia (1191) or the works of Geoffrey’s contemporary Chrétien de Troyes, which together established nearly all of the narrative beats Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur would use three centuries later (1485). While it breaks no new ground, this *Of Arthour and of Merlyn* interestingly does go out of its way to make clear points about language, religion, nationality, canonicity, and redaction, and explicitly excludes several storylines that — even by that time — had come to be regarded as staples of Arthurian lore. It is also the only extant version that is juxtaposed with two other specific works of interest, both therein transcribed by Scribe One: *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Dauid the Kyng*.<sup>119</sup>

In each of the surviving collections from that time in which *Of Arthour and of Merlyn* appears, it is paired with *Kyng Alisaunder*. In fact, passages from the two stories eerily echo one another. That they are paired in the Auchinleck, then, is not aberrant. However, the inclusion of *Dauid the Kyng* alongside these two stories – with all three transcribed by the leader of such an ambitious and singular project – hints at the Auchinleck’s distinctive importance in the figuration of Arthur and his role in the development of the superhero.

In a deft rhetorical move, Scribe One juxtaposes examples of kingship featuring a Classical military conqueror (Alexander) and a biblical religious king from whom Jesus of Nazareth was descended (David) with the story of the idealized English, Christian king – Arthur

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<sup>119</sup>The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. July 2003. National Library of Scotland. 1 May 2008  
 <[http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/psalm\\_head.html](http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/psalm_head.html)>, <[http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/alisaunder\\_head.html](http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/alisaunder_head.html)>,  
 <[http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/arthur\\_head.html](http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/heads/arthur_head.html)>.

– and by doing so, puts them and their biographies into dialogue with one another, allowing a direct comparison of the literary motifs present across all three.

### Three Kings

According to five historians of antiquity, (Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, Justin, and Plutarch), after Philip II of Macedon visited the Oracle of Ammon at Siwa, rumors began to circulate about what the Oracle had revealed: that his son Alexander's true father was none other than Zeus. Quite a whisper campaign, indeed, and one later supported by Plutarch, who, in his work on Alexander (Alexander 3.1, 3 to be exact), claimed that Philip avoided his wife Olympia's bed because of her affinity for sleeping in the company of snakes.<sup>120</sup> The will of the divine having a hand in the choosing of kings, though, was far from a novel idea.

Seven centuries before Alexander, the shepherd boy David was purported to have been anointed by a prophet of God – Samuel – before soothing the ailing King Saul's madness by his skillful lyre plucking.<sup>121</sup> In King David's second origin story – to borrow a phrase from comic books – he first encounters Saul when he brings supplies to his older brothers, who are fighting in Saul's army against the Philistines and their greatest weapon: the giant Goliath. In this second narrative, David is described as “the youngest,”<sup>122</sup> of the brothers, not yet old enough to follow them into battle. Since he is not yet a man, or at least of the age of service in the Israelite military, it must be assumed that he has yet to reach the Jewish age of manhood, 13 years old.

No matter how he comes into contact with King Saul, David slays Goliath and ends up serving Israel as a great military commander under Saul, gaining popularity for his remarkable victory and for continued success on the battlefield through his teens and early twenties. It is said

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<sup>120</sup> Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>>.

<sup>121</sup> I Samuel 16:1

<sup>122</sup> I Samuel 17:14

that “David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul sent him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.”<sup>123</sup> Before long, the boy-turned-general out-paced his king in popularity, as the people began to sing, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands.”<sup>124</sup>

Aware that his own transgressions against the Hebrew faith had cost him God’s favor, Saul saw David’s emergence as a threat. To Saul, the boy who slew the giant was now the warrior who would take the throne of Israel, so he declared David an outlaw. Through some not-quite-kosher machinations, suspiciously well-timed assassinations, and deft military planning and showmanship – including a little guerilla warfare – David eventually ascended to the throne, becoming the King of Judah by age 30 (seven and a half years before he conquers the remnants of Saul’s dynasty).<sup>125</sup>

But the divine Presence leaves David, too, after a time, and not just because of his impressive body count. While Moses is arguably responsible for just as many deaths, by the time he is said to ascend to heaven at the age of 120, Deuteronomy 34:7 says he was as virile as a young man; David, on the other hand, died at age 70, and was far from the picture of health, unable to even keep himself warm.<sup>126</sup> Because of his transgressions, David is judged unworthy to be the vessel through which God builds the Temple.<sup>127</sup> What transgressions, you ask? Wasn’t he the Jewish King Arthur? Here enters the historical King David, or at least the closest approximation to what the “real” King David was like.

In the Bible, David’s history is given in two parts: one consisting of an official “court history,” in which his praises are sung and he can do no wrong, and the other consisting of

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<sup>123</sup> 1 Samuel 18:5

<sup>124</sup> 1 Samuel 18:7

<sup>125</sup> Jonathan Kirsch. King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000. pp. 135.

<sup>126</sup> 1 Kings 1:1

<sup>127</sup> 2 Samuel 6

David's downfall, including the murder of his own son.<sup>128</sup> The one thing that remains consistent between the court history narrative and the so-called succession narrative – or inside history – is that David is a formidable warrior, earning victory after victory and expanding the Israelite kingdom to its greatest territorial extent.<sup>129</sup> He was the great hope, the ideal king, and, as UC Berkeley professor Steve Goldsmith said in a Bible as Literature lecture on Feb. 26, 2007, the unity that Israel reputedly experienced under David “may be something like Camelot in the Arthur legend.”<sup>130</sup>

Like Arthur, he originates as an outsider, perhaps even more so given the fact that he is declared an outlaw. Like Arthur, he rises to prominence because of his skill with the blade, and his ability to fight. His legacy of conquest would be passed down to the next great warrior who conquered that part of the world. A little more than 500 years after David reigned,<sup>131</sup> Alexander the Great – born in 356 B.C.E. – would conquer not only Judea, but the entire known Western world.

By the age of 18, Alexander had commanded a crucial cavalry charge in the Battle of Chaeronea which ultimately helped his father – Philip II of Macedon – attain the submission of the Greek city-states. Philip then united those city-states under a single banner – the League of Corinth – with an eye toward an all-out invasion of Persia. He would never see that come to fruition. After Philip's assassination, 20-year-old Alexander ascends to the throne to which his father was elected.<sup>132</sup> The several Greek kings that had, under Phillip, been members of the

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<sup>128</sup> David appears distraught at his son's death in 2 Samuel 18:33 in spite of the political advantages it brings. However, that is likely performative, as he appears similarly distraught at the deaths of Saul, Jonathan (2 Samuel 1.11-27), and Abner (3:31-39), all of which served to politically benefit him. To paraphrase Prof. Goldsmith, if King David is writing a song about you, you'd better start running.

<sup>129</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible. 3rd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 453.

<sup>130</sup> Prof. Steven Goldsmith. "How Israel Came to Have a Monarchy." English C107: The English Bible as Literature. University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Feb. 26, 2007.

<sup>131</sup> Prof. Steven Goldsmith. "Kings and Messengers." English C107: The English Bible as Literature. University of California, Berkeley. 4 LeConte Hall, Mar. 14, 2007.

<sup>132</sup> Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006  
<<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>>.

League of Corinth, chafed under the idea of serving this newly-crowned boy king and rebelled. So, Alexander, before embarking on his first military campaign as king, was forced to bring these kings to heel in order to display his worthiness to rule in his father's place.<sup>133</sup> Like King David – who unified the kingdoms of Judah and Israel – and Arthur – who united the British (Welsh), Scots, and Picts<sup>134</sup> – Alexander united the nations of the Mediterranean. In just 13 years, he conquered an empire that stretched from the Indus River in the east to the Balkan Peninsula in the west, from the Red Sea in the south to the Black Sea in the north. The jewel of his empire, Alexandria, eventually became home to the largest repository of knowledge thought to have ever existed, though he wouldn't live to see it built.

In the spring of 323 B.C.E., Alexander was warned by Babylonian astronomers not to enter the city of Babylon, where his navy and his army were gathering for an Arabian expedition. The seers foretold his death should he enter the city. Alexander dismissed their warnings, and by the end of May, he fell ill. On June 11, he died, leaving his empire in utter chaos, and without a ruler. Alexander's brother Arridaeus succeeded him for a short time, but as soon as Alexander's last breath was exhaled, his generals began to feud over their respective territories. Before Arridaeus could reign in his brothers commanders, they had torn Alexander's conquests apart. Not even the birth of Alexander's son by his wife Roxane – just weeks after his death – could stop the inevitable civil war between the great conqueror's officers.<sup>135</sup>

Alexander was more of a general than he was a statesman. For 10 years, he led armies to conquer whatever land he could see. His legacy was not that of government, but of battle. It was his reluctance to accept his mortality and to establish some concrete form of succession that

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> *Historia*, Book IX, Ch. VI.

<sup>135</sup> *Alexander the Great*, Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander00c.html>>.

doomed his legacy. His downfall, then, was pride. With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that Alexander's greatest hero was Achilles.

When Alexander crossed into Asia, Plutarch reports that he landed at Ilion, the site of the mythical Troy. He sacrificed animals to Athena and made dedications to the heroes. He then adorned with wreaths the sepulchral column of Achilles, after having anointed himself beneath it, and held naked running races to honor the dead. Why did Alexander do this? It couldn't be mere hero worship, could it? With photo-ops and political correspondents still centuries away, this wasn't a public-relations move. If this was hero worship, how could Alexander be so sure that Achilles ever even lived? All he knew of the man was from stories told long after the Trojan War was purported to have occurred. Was he foolishly showing "an honourable veneration for something that is a figment of the imagination"?<sup>136</sup> Perhaps. But perhaps Alexander was participating in a tradition that extends across time and cultures, all the way to places like San Diego, Calif. (the annual home of Comic Con International), Edinburgh, Scotland (a main geological feature of which is called Arthur's Seat), and Las Vegas, Nev., home of the Excalibur Hotel and Casino. Perhaps, what really happened doesn't really matter. What matters, and what we remember, are the stories. It is the story that has the most power, not the actual history. Jan De Vries, one of the most respected figures in German philology, said of Alexander's display at Ilion, and the question of whether or not the conqueror thought the stories of Achilles and of Troy were real:

"These are indeed questions that Alexander could not have answered and which would have seemed to him entirely senseless. But they are questions that we can raise only to our own shame. Reality is not what happened more than two thousand years ago in the Scamander plain, but what has lived for centuries in the memories of many generations as

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<sup>136</sup> Jan de Vries. Heroic Song and Heroic Legend. Trans. B. J. Timmer. New York: Arno Press, 1978. pp. 81

a precious testimony to a glorious past, and—even more important—from which these generations have come to life.”<sup>137</sup>

That same patch of earth proved to be fertile soil for ninth century English mythmakers, who took a pagan warrior chieftain and made him King, with a family tree tracing all the way back to Brutus of Troy. This legitimizing of the English royal line began with the anonymous Historia Brittonum (often attributed to Nennius because of his added commentary) and continued in Geoffrey’s subsequent 12th century Historia Regum Britanniae. That lineage links Arthur not only to Brutus, Aeneas, and the royal family of Troy, but to the founders of Rome.

In the Auchinleck, just like Dear Ole’ Gran-Pap Brutus, Arthur keeps hacking away at giant-sized inhabitants of the island, such as King Guifas, who was “sexten fet o length”<sup>138</sup> (16 feet tall). During a battle to save Leodegrans, Arthur faces the heathen kings “sornegrex & Saphiran, / Aither of hem was xiiii fot lang [14 feet tall]” and slays them, much to the delight of Guinevere, who watches as her future husband—unbeknownst to either of them—saves her father from certain defeat. In the final skirmish of that battle, Arthur cleaves the giant Randoil “with his swerd that wele bot / thurthout hauberk & aketoun / To the midel al adoun.”<sup>139</sup>

With a kingdom and a line ordained by the gods, as well as a pedigree of giant-slaying, the future High King shares at least that much in common with David and Alexander, but the similarities go much further. Arthur, conceived with the help of a concealment spell cast by Merlin on Uther Pendragon, is spirited away by the wizard soon after his birth.<sup>140</sup> He unsheathes Excalibur from its rocky prison in Robert de Boron’s *Merlin* (ca. 1200 C.E.) as a squire—a young man between 12 and 17 years old.<sup>141</sup> As a boy, he should not be able to fight, but like

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid 181-182

<sup>138</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 7448

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. ll. 6413-6414

<sup>140</sup> Historia, Book VIII, Ch. XIX

<sup>141</sup> Norris J. Lacy. “Merlin.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

David, he proves that he can: When deemed too young by his ally King Ban in the Auchinleck, Arthur – his blood boiling – spurs his horse forward to deal with the enemy king, Saphiran.<sup>142</sup> As an heir born out of wedlock, he must establish credibility and instill confidence once he ascends to the throne, like Alexander. Like both of the previous kings, Arthur unifies a fractured nation, bringing together the Welsh, the Scots, and the Picts.

When I first considered the Auchinleck, these similarities kept gnawing at the back of my mind. I was certainly familiar with their biographies — historical, fictional, and otherwise — but there was something ... more. Drawing from the three works present in the Auchinleck, as well as from common and general perceptions of the biographies of these three kings, I littered my college notebooks with Venn diagrams and lists of historical events, attributes, and themes. Circled in blue pen were four phrases that not only applied to these three kings, but indeed to the fictional biographies of what have come to be termed the “Mount Rushmore” superheroes — the characters that first spring to mind at the mention of the word (Superman, Captain America, Batman, Spider-Man, the X-Men, Thor, Iron Man, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, and the Flash): the **Boy King**, the **Warrior King**, the **Giant Slayer**, and the **Outsider**.

The *Of Arthur and of Merlyn* of the Auchinleck not only accesses many previous Arthur traditions — some of which it includes, some of which it explicitly excludes, and some of which it alters to fit the manuscript’s ultimate goals — but it exists in dialogue with the two other kingship narratives, *and* therefore with Arthur’s superheroic descendants.

## Boy King

*The role of Boy King is primarily characterized by the young age at which the heroic character emerges or gains the abilities and characteristics that make them heroic or*

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<sup>142</sup> Auchinleck MS, ll. 6335-6374



*superheroic. The hero or superhero who fulfills the Boy King role takes on their primary set of responsibilities, or mission,<sup>143</sup> from a place of youth or inexperience, as perceived by their surrounding culture.*

The term, as I coined it in 2007, is admittedly gendered, owing to the pervasiveness of the phrase in popular culture. However, it should be taken to mean any character, regardless of gender. For instance, Wonder Woman is a child of Zeus and Hippolyta, whose parentage granted her the powers of a Greek demigod from birth; when she saved crashed military pilot Steve Trevor and returned him to the world of men, she had never left her all-female tribe of Amazons on Paradise Island, and was thus a naive innocent. All of the characters who inhabit this project, from King David to Captain America, are considered either novices, youths, children, or innocents when they first take up their respective missions.

## **Warrior King**

*A Warrior King is a figure who is involved in or gains fame and notoriety from engaging in physical battle or military campaigns.*

Alexander most certainly fits this mold, as does David, since both were renowned conquerors. David expanded the Israelite empire to its greatest extent, as Alexander did with his. Arthur also fits this mold, seeing as the earliest forms of his legend cohere around a series of battle chronicles, the most famous of which mentioning the Battle of Mount Badon against Saxon forces.<sup>144</sup> Seeing as Superman and Captain America—the foremost representatives of the modern superhero genre—both have as one of their defining characteristics a pledge not to kill, one would seem to have difficulty portraying them as warriors. However, all one has to do is to

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<sup>143</sup> Defined by Peter Coogan on page 31 of *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, as “prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda.”

<sup>144</sup> R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy. *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History From 3500 B.C. to the Present*. 4th ed. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993. pp. 193.

look at the fact that Captain America was and is a soldier, who owes his very existence to top secret military research and in many iterations carries firearms, to realize that he is indeed a warrior, in the most literal sense. He is also portrayed as a master strategist, as was King David. Superman often uses physical might to defeat his enemies, and in a panel from Mark Waid and Alex Ross's 1996 DC Elseworlds series, *Kingdom Come*, a private conversation between Superman and Wonder Woman yields this:

**Wonder Woman:** "You said it yourself once, Clar—Kal. We are warriors. We have an obligation to wage combat."<sup>145</sup>

## Giant Slayer

*A Giant Slayer contends with literal and figurative foes of gargantuan proportions, showing that might does not always make right, and that faith, courage, cunning, and selflessness can overcome any obstacle.*

The role of Giant Slayer is perhaps the easiest role for any superhero or hero to fulfill in a literal sense. The idea of slaying giants is a motif that extends far back into human history.<sup>146</sup> But it is significant in that the superheroes who descend from Arthurian tradition and heroes who were antecedents of the same contend against giant-sized foes, whether their immensity is literal or figurative. Famously, David slays the Philistine Goliath, who taunted the Israelite army in I Samuel 17 and stood "six cubits and a span"<sup>147</sup>. The Alexander narrative present in the Auchinleck contains tales of the Hellenic hero slaying outsized beasts, the most interesting of his conquests being the figures of Gog and Magog.

<sup>145</sup> Mark Waid (writer), Alex Ross (artist). "Up in the Sky." *Kingdom Come* #3 (July 1996), DC Comics. pp. 15.

<sup>146</sup> "giant." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 April 2008. <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9036721>>.

<sup>147</sup> 1 Samuel 17.4; Six cubits and a span equals about nine and one-half feet

Gog and Magog — sometimes fused into a single entity, Gogmagog — are first mentioned in Revelations 20:7-8.<sup>148</sup> From their beginnings as ambiguous antagonists in the Bible, they evolve into a pair of giants in the Celtic and Welsh legends of the British Isles,<sup>149</sup> and from there go on to appear in the Arthurian oeuvre, where Arthur — with the assistance of the giant Gargantua — fights and defeats them.<sup>150</sup> In *Kyng Alisaunder*, Gog and Magog are very vaguely typed as perhaps nations of barbarians (Many man bitwene Gog / Thou shalt fynde and Magog / That Thou ne [founde] none swiche / Neuer in no kyngriche”<sup>151</sup>), as interpreted by some biblical scholars. However, in other texts, it is even less clear who or what Gog and Magog are; all that is certain is that there are 22 evil nations between them. They are variously seen as nations unto themselves, as geographical landmarks (such as two mountains), or perhaps as leaders of said nations.<sup>152</sup> In any event, Alexander fights and defeats the super-sized pair in battle and then erects a great gate across a mountain pass to keep them out of the civilized world. In many medieval traditions, the building of the gate and the defeat of Gog and Magog — as giants or as nations — are seen as Alexander’s crowning achievement.<sup>153</sup>

## Outsider

The role of the Outsider is the one most fraught with difficulty, for how does one define an outsider without a consistent set of uniform cultural norms from which given characters can be excluded? How can one judge one outsider in terms of another? Yet, it continues to be as necessary for superheroes today as it was for the heroes of old to remain outside of the

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<sup>148</sup> “And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.”

<sup>149</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy. *A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends*. Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2004. pp. 189.

<sup>150</sup> Dixon-Kennedy, 189

<sup>151</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 5968-5971

<sup>152</sup> Gerrit H.V. Bunt. *Alexander the Great in the Literature of Medieval Britain*. Groningen, Netherlands: Egbert Forsten, 1994. pp. 9, 21, 23, 24, 32, 39, 77, 87.

<sup>153</sup> “The Legend of Gog and Magog”, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 23, #2. (Apr., 1933), pp. 350-351

mainstream, so to speak. Heroes and superheroes may look and act like us, but their very existence is predicated on the fact that they are categorically *not* like us — whether by virtue of their birth, their appearance, or their extraordinary abilities. *The key to this particular role, and to its greater significance, lies in the fact that despite some form of Other-ship, the Outsider hero becomes integral to the society or culture from which they are inherently excluded, regardless of what culture that may be.*

Angela Ndaliansis puts it best in her introduction to the anthology, Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman, when she states that superheroes

“respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. Whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address. Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the *status quo*.”<sup>154</sup>

There is perhaps no more poignant an outsidership than that shared by Arthur and Superman, who are outsiders by virtue of the most fundamental element of their existence that they could not control — their birth. Superman was born on another planet — a doomed one at that — and Arthur is the illegitimate son of a king who begot him through nefarious means, namely deception, magic, and murder. Superman must grapple not only with his own sense of duality and with the immigrant experience, but with the burden of being the sole (until the later introduction of other survivors of Krypton’s destruction) inheritor of an entire race’s legacy. Arthur must constantly negotiate the fact that, given his illegitimate origins, he is in possession of an ill-gotten birthright that is his only by default.

Youth, too, is a mark of outsidership, particularly where it involves roles where masculinity, experience, and martial prowess are highly valued, if not necessary. Like Arthur,

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<sup>154</sup> Ndaliansis, Angela. "Do We Need Another Hero?" Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman. Ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndaliansis, Chris Mackie. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007. pp. 3.

whose youth is cause for other nobles to cast doubt on him as a leader of men, David's youth is used against him when he offers his slingshot to defeat Goliath. In I Samuel 17:33, King Saul says to the shepherd boy, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." Furthermore, as David's exploits in battle gain him fame and recognition among King Saul's people, David's popularity begins to rival that of the king himself, so Saul declares him an outlaw and hunts him down, making him an outsider twice over and creating an intriguing interplay between the roles of Warrior King and Outsider.<sup>155</sup>

Alexander is perhaps the most obvious Outsider, in the sense that he was not Greek—though he is inextricably linked to Hellenistic tradition—but rather Macedonian. The old kings of Greece trusted the then-20-year-old Alexander's deceased father, Philip II of Macedon, because he was one of them — a peer, even if not a ruler himself of a Greek city-state. It was not so with Alexander, who experienced considerable difficulty in reconstituting the League (more on that later).

The Auchinleck, by placing these three kings together – with Arthur at the center of the compilation – forces a reading of the trio as a unit, given their remarkably similar character biographies and the sharing of the four roles of Boy King, Warrior King, Giant Slayer, and Outsider – the roots of which were already well-established in Arthurian lore by the time the manuscript was compiled. By including the two other kings with Arthur, the Auchinleck becomes a formation of John Byrne's Man of Steel, the re-boot to DC Comics' Superman franchise: A renewed superhero for a new age, with a clear continuity, an unassailable status, and a re-centered narrative that makes him relevant for a different generation.

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<sup>155</sup> I Samuel 20:30-33

## ***Chapter 11: A Very Strange, Enchanted Boy***

### **The Arthur of the Auchinleck**

There was a boy  
A very strange enchanted boy  
They say he wandered very far  
Very far  
Over land and sea

A little shy  
And sad of eye  
But very wise was he

And then one day  
One magic day he passed my way  
And while we spoken of many things  
Fools and kings  
This he said to me

The greatest thing  
You'll ever learn  
Is just to love  
And be loved in return

### **– The King Cole Trio, *Nature Boy*<sup>156</sup>**

By the time the Auchinleck was compiled, Arthur had already gained enough cultural cache to serve as the focus of an attempt to create a literary canon for an entire nation. At that point, more than two centuries had passed since Geoffrey penned *Historia*. Arthur's central place in the Auchinleck is a perfect illustration of just how integral the story itself had become not only to a sense of English/British national identity, but to the very language itself, both written and spoken.

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<sup>156</sup> A cover of this song by the artist Kerli was used to promote the final season of the CW superhero show *Smallville*, which depicts the maturation of a young Clark Kent which had a motto through the majority of its run: No tights, no flights. This series was the story of Clark Kent – a strange, enchanted boy, who traveled from a “very far” star. That 10th and final season ends with both tights and flights as Tom Welling's Clark finally becomes Superman, accepting his inheritance of the broad pro-social moral code of King Arthur and his cultural role in literature – a secular messiah who inspires people to strive to create a more accepting, egalitarian world: “the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.”

The manuscript contains a large collection of Middle English poetry from a time where there are precious few Middle English texts that have survived. The works in the Auchinleck—Arthur included—provide important information about English dialects at an early stage.<sup>157</sup> Its constituent works represent a wide range of genres, including “romance, hagiography, texts offering basic doctrinal instruction, a chronicle, humorous tales, and poems of satire and complaint,”<sup>158</sup> illustrating that the English of the 14th century knew how to tell stories, many of them Arthur-centric, and had been telling them for a considerable amount of time. While the Arthur story still bears the marks of his appropriation from Welsh folk hero to Christian Anglo-Saxon, this collection puts Arthur at the very least back into the linguistic realm of the cultures that created him. It is a way to linguistically redeem and reclaim a story first authored and popularized in the realm of Western British orality, not Anglo-Saxon or Norman literature.

While the first quarter of the Arthur story contained in the Auchinleck appears in four other manuscripts, this particular version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* found in the Auchinleck is unique to the manuscript because of its considerable length and detail, evinces a concern with telling the entire story, not just a fragment.

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

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<sup>157</sup> The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. National Library of Scotland. 25 March 2008. <<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/importance.html>>.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid

heroes were revamped and cleaned up so that their continuities would be easier to write and to understand. The origins went back to the roots of the respective heroes and found what was elemental about the characters. Such was the case with the re-launch of the Superman title.<sup>159</sup>

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

Think of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia as Action Comics #1. It gives us Arthur, it gives us his lineage, it gives us some of the major aspects of the Arthur story, but it doesn’t have some of the things that we today consider major parts of the Arthurian mythos, such as the Sword in the Stone (though it does have Caliburnus, later renamed Excalibur), the Grail Quest, and the Lancelot/Guinevere storyline. Similarly, Action Comics #1 presents us with Superman, a brief backstory, and an embryonic version of the powers that we have come to associate with him, yet the Last Son of Krypton was not yet able to fly, was not yet said to have been raised in

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<sup>159</sup> Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:37:11.



Smallville, Kansas, was not vulnerable to anything but “a bursting shell,”<sup>160</sup> and had not yet met the diabolical Lex Luthor.

But like Arthur, Superman’s longevity and popularity allowed for further mythologizing and fleshing out of his story, and certain elements that we now consider foundational and canonical were added in the years following his debut: his parents Jon and Martha Kent, his childhood love interest Lana Lang, his aversion to radioactive green Kryptonite, and his ability not only to leap, but to truly fly. The foes that both Arthur and Superman fought, over time, became larger and larger, both figuratively and literally. Arthur leads an army to the gates of Rome, in some stories, and in the Auchinleck fights non-English foes 20 feet tall, not – as Geoffrey wrote – the invading Saxons, who, while imposing, were still just men. Despite being halted at the Battle of Mount Badon by a force of united native peoples,<sup>161</sup> the Saxons did eventually conquer Britannia, and over time, came to be known as the English, as opposed to the Welsh Britons. Just as Superman goes from righting social wrongs and giving wife-beaters a taste of their own medicine to fighting alien supercomputers, over time, Arthur goes from fighting the progenitors of the English to fighting Danes and the Irish in the pages of the Auchinleck.

## **The Englishing of Arthur**

Before the 14th century, books were written almost exclusively in Latin and French — the languages of the learned. After Historia was written in Latin ca. 1136-38, Arthur’s story crossed the English Channel and was translated into Norman French, where he was given an adulterous wife, a traitorous right-hand man, and an illegitimate son. In the century and a half between Historia and the Auchinleck, the story had drifted away from its center — Britain.

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<sup>160</sup> Action Comics #1

<sup>161</sup> Geoffrey Ash. “Badon.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

At the time the Auchinleck was assembled, the English had begun to distance themselves from the Norman French and to form a separate sociopolitical identity. English was beginning to become an acceptable language for printed matter, not just Latin or French.<sup>162</sup> It then follows that the use of “Inglisch”, as it is referred to in the manuscript, in written works — especially projects like the Auchinleck — would be a tool to advance the idea of a renewed national pride.<sup>163</sup>

Since the Auchinleck — as the earliest known monolingual middle English text, the earliest known anthology of English literature, and the largest collection of English romances up until that time — is theorized to have been produced with the intent of creating a national, British body of literature, what better a centerpiece would there be but a revitalized, redeemed, and re-anointed King Arthur, written not in Latin or in French, but “on Inglis”?

The editors of the Auchinleck went out of their way to rid the Arthur story of all of the foreign traditions that had accumulated around it, and reduced it to its essential elements, essentially serving as what we would today call a reboot. What else undergoes reboots to bring mythology back to a commonly-agreed-upon center? Superhero comic books.

Superman was nearing his 50th birthday when DC decided to reboot its entire universe in 1985. In his Man of Steel run, writer and artist John Byrne took Supes – an already-well-known and established character – and returned him to his basics, with a few new twists appropriate to the time period. Superman no longer fought the slum lords and mobsters of the Depression, but rather engaged in pro-American, anti-Soviet propaganda and was overtly nationalistic in his new incarnation. Similarly, the Auchinleck’s Arthur goes on crusades, swears by Jesus, and never meets Sir Lancelot. By the time the Auchinleck was compiled, Arthur had picked up several

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<sup>162</sup> Loomis, Laura Hibbard. “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340.” *Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962: 156-157. First published in *PMLA* 57 (1942): 595-627. pp. 157.

<sup>163</sup> Calkin, Siobhain Bly. Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript. New York: Routledge, 2005. pp. 8-9.

elemental pieces that could not be taken out—Guinevere, the sword, the wizard, and the “chosen one” trope. The scribes did not take these away—they couldn’t. But they could (and did) make these elements expressly English, and expressly Christian.

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

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

The text understands itself and its role in the exclusion of French traditions, typing the “romaunce” in which Lancelot appears as inconsequential and inauthentic, essentially making it an Elseworlds story<sup>164</sup> by saying it’s been written “elleswher.”

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

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

These lines serve as a mechanism to explicitly, and immediately throw out all other traditions and all other languages in which Arthur’s story may appear, for none can tell of Arthur – an English hero – as the English can (even though he originally fought against the incursion of

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<sup>164</sup> Elseworlds is the catch-all term (and now an official imprint) for DC Comics stories that take place outside the DC Universe canon. These stories happen in alternate dimensions, parallel realities, or any other setting writers can devise that has little to no bearing on mainline continuity.

the English's ancestors, the Saxons). Arthur has so long been a hero of the English (at this point, he is more than eight centuries removed from his native folk origins) that the Arthur works of the day, to borrow from Geertz, had become "increasingly embedded in the cultures from which they come and to possess within themselves more and more of the cultures linked intentions" (Greenblatt, 25).

Even though stories of Arthur did not originate with the Anglo-Saxons, they were there for the events in question, just on the other side. It is possible that by dismissing the Norman French tradition and mobilizing a hero of British pedigree against the native British peoples (i.e. the Celts, Irish, and Welsh), that the English were using the island's greatest figure to cement their own legitimacy as its proprietors. As such, it is the English and the English alone who have the full and only right to tell Arthur's 'real' story – what today we would call an "authorized biography." That "authorized" story, though, is in fact itself a gloss of Arthur's Welsh origins and the pre-Galfridian tradition of him battling the Saxons—which had long been a canonical aspect of Arthurian lore.

### **Converting the King**

So the alternate traditions have been quickly thrown out just by way of re-working language. But how does the Auchinleck make this now-English king into a proper Christian? He owes much of the supernatural elements of his story to Welsh traditions, and even his most-trusted council to a dark-skinned wizard borne of the union of a nun and a demon.<sup>165</sup> It starts with Excalibur. Recall the dragon motif and the pagan mysticism surrounding the roots of the Sword in the Stone myth, and that Excalibur is in several stories introduced either by the Lady of the Lake or the wizard Merlin, and you have some of the most difficult pagan symbols to

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid, ll. 675-686

get rid of in the story of Arthur. The sword's inherent importance to the story precludes it from being completely dismissed out of hand, but it still has to be dealt with.

With such a rich non-Christian tradition surrounding the sword, it must be changed in some manner to fit the form of the British Christian king that the Auchinleck tries to construct. First, it is taken from the province of Merlin and paganism into the churchyard, where it is introduced not by the dark-skinned wizard Merlin, but by a bishop.<sup>166</sup> Instead of being a magical pagan weapon in its own right, its appearance is attributed to “Ihesu Crist on heighe.”<sup>167</sup> Gone are the images of the Lady of the Lake holding up the sword for Arthur to grasp, of a sword stuck not “long and heighe” upright in a churchyard, but buried in a stone as if driven in by hand (a more slantwise proposition than a sword standing straight up and down). In this more vertical presentation suggested by the Auchinleck, the sword that was once a Roman cavalry weapon with a broad blade and near-absent curved quillons used by a native warrior becomes a figuration of the Christian cross rather than a symbol of the native Britons' pagan roots. The elevation of the English language occurs yet again on the sword, the legends of which predate Middle English:

“Ichil wele that ye it wite  
On the pommel was ywrite  
‘Icham yhot Estalibore  
Vnto a king fair tresore.’  
On Inglis is this writeing  
‘kerue stiel & iren & al thing.’”

On the pommel is written, “I am called Excalibur, unto a king a fair treasure.” And specifically, the work says, “In English is this writing,” also saying that the sword carves steel, iron, and all things. While the abilities of the sword are consistent with its pagan Welsh

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<sup>166</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 2783

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2814

analogues, this is most certainly not the Welsh *Caledfwlch* or the Latin *Caliburnus*. It says specifically, *in English*, that it is “Estalibore.”

While some well-known aspects of the Arthur story with non-English origins cannot be excluded (i.e. the Sarmatian focus on cavalry and swordsmanship and the pagan mysticism of Merlin), they can be, like Excalibur, translated, or, to put a finer point on it, converted. The conversion of the sword from the magical *Caledfwlch* of Celtic and Welsh heroes to the Estalibore of an English, Christian king is but one instance where one can see the sure signs of appropriation of ideas from other cultures into a Christian, English conception of Arthur.

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

### **Boy Kings, Warrior Kings, Giant Slayers, and Outsiders**

When David slays Goliath, he is but a boy.<sup>168</sup> While David is considered to be around 30 years of age by the time he takes the throne of Judah (seven and a half years before he conquers the remnants of Saul’s dynasty<sup>169</sup>), his ascent to power began when he was but a boy of possibly 12.

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<sup>168</sup> Kirsch, Jonathan. *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000. pp. 50

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 135

Alexander took his first military command at the age of 18, when he led a crucial charge that decided one of Phillip's battles in 338 B.C.E., and by 20 he was crowned king after his father had been assassinated by his own guard.<sup>170</sup>

Arthur of course, is but a squire when he frees the sword Excalibur from the stone.<sup>171</sup> In fact the Auchinleck calls him "Arturet ... mild & meke" (ll.2851-2). The *-et* suffix is used several times in the text in much the same way the suffix is used in modern American English—to denote something small. A medieval squire would have been between the ages of 14 and 21, making Arthur still very much an adolescent or at best, a young man.<sup>172</sup> This youth causes several problems for Arthur, as even during his more epic battles within the text, his closest allies, namely King Ban, question whether his youth hinders his skill and knowledge on the battlefield. Ban says to Arthur as the young king girds himself for a skirmish, "Nay, lete me ... For þou art to ȝong and ek to lite oȝain swiche a deuel to smite"<sup>173</sup> ("Nay, let me ... for thou art young and much too light against such a duel to smite.")

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

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

<sup>170</sup> Alexander the Great. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>>.

<sup>171</sup> According to nearly all sources I consulted, the tales surrounding the origin of Excalibur vary from text to text and from interpretation to interpretation. It is sometimes one in the same with the Sword in the Stone, and sometimes it is only acquired by Arthur from the Lady of the Lake. The John Boorman film *Excalibur* (1981) reconciles the two origin stories rather nicely by having Excalibur pulled from the stone, and then later repaired by the Lady of the Lake. For a more complete discussion on this, see the "Excalibur" entry in Phyllis Ann Karr's The Arthurian Companion, Second Edition.

<sup>172</sup> Marvin Hull. Castle Learning Center: Medieval Knights. 1997. Castles of Britain: Dedicated to the Study and Promotion of British Castles. 20 May 2006 <<http://www.castles-of-britain.com/castle35.htm>>.

<sup>173</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6338-6340

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

“As he was fair doinde þis  
 King Lot, king Nanter & ober of priss  
 Of (Arthur's) ȝiftes spite hadden  
 & his coroun anon wiþradden.  
 Vp þai sterten with gret bost,  
 Euerich king wiþ al his ost  
 & seyð an herlot for noþing  
 No schuld neuer ben her king  
 & þouȝt wiþ gret deshonor  
 For to misdo sir Arthour,  
 Ac Arthour men bitven þrest.”<sup>174</sup>

Arthur is not immediately accepted as the king because he is an outsider not only by virtue of his illegitimate birth, but because of the sheer fact that he is but a boy. Arthur's youth causes rebellion among some of the other nobles of the land<sup>175</sup> just as the kings of the city states of Greece rebelled against their new youthful king in a similar, yet far more scathing passage found in the full version of the Auchinleck's highly fragmented *Kyng Alisaunder*, a work found nearly whole in MS Laud 622. The similarities between the two passages owe perhaps to a widely held belief in the mutual authorship of the two works,<sup>176</sup> which appear together in the Lincoln's Inn manuscript,<sup>177</sup> and therefore perhaps an understanding of an implicit connection between Arthur and Alexander:

“And a letter, par amoure,  
 Of whiche swiche was the tenure:  
 ‘Darrye, kyng of alle kynges,  
 The godes that haueth to eldringes,  
 For his nexte by-syb cosyn  
 Beeth Jubiter and Appolyn,  
 Gouernoures of lewed and lered

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, ll. 3134-43

<sup>175</sup> Dixon-Kennedy, 27

<sup>176</sup> David Burnley. “Dynastic Romance: Of Arthour and of Merlin.” *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages II: The Arthur of the English*, ed. W.R.J. Baron. Cardiff, England: University of Wales Press, 1999. pp. 84.

<sup>177</sup> London, Lincoln's Inn MS 150. W. Midlands, Shropshire. Late 14th (*Kyng Alisaunder*) and 15th centuries. 6746 lines. The Lincoln's MS also contains a version of *Of Arthour and of Merlin*.



That beeth in this middellerd,  
 Sendeth gretynge withouten amoure  
 To a younge fals robboure.  
 Alisaunder, thou conion wood,  
 In the spilleth thi faye blood!  
 Thou hast withholde my trowage,  
 And ydon me more outrage—  
 Brent myne tounes, myne men yslaw.  
 Thou art worthi to ben ydrawe.  
 Nere-the-lees, thou canst no good;  
 Ich wyte it al thi younge blood.  
 There-fore Ich habbe thee ysent  
 A top and scourge to present,  
 And with golde a little punge,  
 For thou has yeres yonge.  
 Wende thou hom therewith and pleye,  
 Ich thee rede, yongue boye!<sup>178</sup>”

Additionally, one must also remember that Alexander was himself not Greek, though he is typed as Greek because of his supposed divine lineage that he later constructed for himself<sup>179</sup>. Curiously, though Alexander has become associated with the Hellenistic society, in the *Alisaunder* text, he is quite cruel to the kings of Greece, who had been a thorn in his father’s side.<sup>180</sup> One reason for this – at least in the context of the Auchinleck – could be that Greece went to war with Troy, from whom Geoffrey traces the lineage of the kings of Britain. It was, you recall, Brutus of Troy who led the Trojan diaspora to the then-untamed island, slayed the giants that lived there,<sup>181</sup> and founded the city named Troia Nova (which then became Trinovantum, which then became Caer Lud – in honor of the man who rebuilt it – then it became Caer

<sup>178</sup> MS Laud Misc. 622, *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 1688-1730

<sup>179</sup> *Alexander the Great*. Ed. Jona Lendering. 2006. Livius: Articles on Ancient History. 20 May 2006 <<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander01.html>>.

<sup>180</sup> MS Laud Misc. 622 *Kyng Alisaunder*, ll. 285-1300

<sup>181</sup> One of the giants that Brutus reputedly slew was named Gogmagog—a fusing together of a pair of giants called Gog and Magog. The explicit presence of these giants also plays a much more direct role in the Alexander text, as I will demonstrate.

Llundain, and finally, London).<sup>182</sup> In Geoffrey's Historia, Brutus is "the traditional founder of the British people (and) the progenitor of a line of kings and the eponym of Britain itself."<sup>183</sup>

David is an outsider not only because of his youth, but because of his status as an outlaw before he becomes King of Judah. When Saul seeks to murder him to prevent his popular ascendancy to the throne, David flees into the wilderness and serves for a brief time, ironically enough, with the Philistine army, whose champion he slew as a boy.<sup>184</sup>

The Arthur text, in combination with the two other king texts, shows a distinct effort to either excise or appropriate all non-English and non-Christian traditions on two levels. The macro level of re-appropriation involves the combination of the elements of the two pre-Christian kings of Classical and Biblical roots into a single British Christian monarch. The Auchinleck Arthur then, is composed of elements from the Classical heroes and elements from the Biblical kings of Israel. He is, in a sense, the best of both worlds. This macro-level transformation is supported by the more granular re-appropriation which involves the reshaping of details within the individual story to fit the Christian English model. There is no better microcosm of this than in the life of Merlin, which resembles the *vita* of St. Rumwold, the saint who was born, then miraculously preached for three days and died of exhaustion.<sup>185</sup> The wizard and sorcerer, though born dark-skinned and therefore typed as being out of the space of Christian holiness, is nevertheless given the saintly ability to speak and perform magic as an infant because of his importance to the Arthur story.

Therefore, the presence of the texts of Alexander and David in close proximity to the Arthur text shows Arthur as the combination of the great kings before, a king that is now

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<sup>182</sup> Historia, Book I, Ch. XVII

<sup>183</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy. A Companion to Arthurian and Celtic Myths and Legends. Gloucestershire, England: Sutton Publishing, 2004. pp. 69-70.

<sup>184</sup> I Samuel 18-23

<sup>185</sup> Review of "Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives: Vita s. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi, Vita S. Rumwoldi" by Joseph F. Kelly, *Church History*, Vol. 66, # 3 (Sep., 1997), pp.560-561

Christian and English, rather than pagan and non-English. Arthur solves the problems of using the previous figures as exemplars of kingship by creating out of the two of them a single textual king that helps to serve the presumed purpose of the Auchinleck manuscript.

## **Once and Future**

The biographical similarities alone between the three kings are impossible to ignore, as is their association with one another in medieval tradition and in the Auchinleck. The relationship between Arthur and David, with the former serving as the redeemer of the latter's inequities. Could the inclusion of Psalm 51 and the exclusion of the Guinevere adultery storyline be a way of apologizing for Arthur's adultery with his half-sister in other traditions? Or perhaps could it be the other way around—with the adultery storyline removed from Arthur, he no longer shares that particular fault with David, a fault which led to David's downfall and was one of the reasons he could not build the Temple. David cannot be neither the ideal of kingship nor a savior in a Christian, English framework. However, his purported ancestral link to Jesus of Nazareth means that his biographical similarities to Arthur make him a useful rhetorical tool. By placing one of David's greatest sins in dialogue with that sin's express absence in the Arthurian work, Arthur gains in stature as the ideal model of kingship.

David couldn't be the ideal because he was Jewish and, ultimately, a sinner. Alexander could not be the ideal of kingship because he was a pagan who fathered no viable heir. Arthur, with a loving and loyal wife, carrying the Cross into battle against Saracens, speaking and writing in English, in essence fixes all of the faults of what could be considered his previous incarnations. While this rebooted version of Arthur elided the Welsh, pagan, and Roman influences, it accessed the heart of what made Arthur such a compelling and enduring character in the first place: He was a king of and for the people.

The figure of Arthur accessed something universally understood, some deeper tradition, something ancient yet simultaneously far ahead of its time, something elemental and fundamental. While modernity has placed the author on equal footing with their creations – Ian Flemming’s James Bond, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, to name two who have approached Arthur’s ubiquity – and other, more ancient works have come to be associated with their authors – Plato, Homer – Arthur has no single author or creator. Nor is Arthur who he is – textually – because of any single author’s treatment of him. If the legacy and future of Arthur rested upon evocative writing and skillful characterization, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia would have killed Arthur long ago. No, there is something about the story itself—the Text, rather than the Work—that lit a fire, a reason why Arthur came to be the central locus of the project to create a national British literary canon in the 14th century. The story resonated. Like those eight notes that represent everything that the collective imagination conceives of when it thinks of Superman, the mere name Arthur evokes images, ideals, concepts, and traditions. Arthur became a Text in a sense that wouldn’t be defined until centuries later. It was revolutionary. Why? Because all of the traditions that joined to form Arthuriana, like the character of Arthur himself, are admixtures of previous, more ancient traditions. In the Auchinleck, Arthur *is* Alexander *and* David—Classical and Biblical—combined and refined.

There is one more crucial way in which Arthur deviates from David and Alexander. It is this vital element, introduced by Arthur, that serves as the key to unlocking the emergence of the superhero. Not only do superheroes fulfill each of the four roles as these three kings did, but they also subscribe to a strict moral code and broad pro-social mission that was first introduced, conceptually, in association with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

## ***Chapter 12: A Big, Round Table***

### **Arthur's Gift: A Mission**

At the end of Zack Snyder's "Justice League" (2017), Ben Affleck's Bruce Wayne walks into the abandoned ruins of Wayne Manor, accompanied by Diana Prince (Gal Gadot) – the Amazonian hero known as Wonder Woman. In the leaf-littered great hall, Wayne stops and extends his hand, spreading his fingers wide.

**Bruce:** "Big round table. Six chairs, right there."

**Diana:** "But room for more."

**Bruce:** "But room for more."

When groups of superheroes gather, they tend to do so around conspicuously circular furniture. That, I argue, is no accident. Introduced in Wace's 1155 translation of Historia into Norman French verse (*Brut*), King Arthur's round table serves to establish equality among both high and low born, a poignant symbolic reminder of Arthur's own origins as anonymous squire who, had he not happened upon the Sword in the Stone, would have remained a member of the lower class. This symbol of egalitarianism, equality, and collaboration is representative of a revolutionary development Arthurian tradition would introduce into heroic literature. Unlike the heroes who came before him or the masked vigilantes that presaged the rise of the comic book superhero, Arthur both pursued both a broad, pro-social mission and operated under a moral code.

Some authors, like Coogan, assign the origin of the superhero mission to more recent characters who have more to do with the look and function of modern superhero outfits than they do the interiority of those superheroes. Coogan cites three figures in particular: Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and Robin Hood. While Zorro's mission is clearly pro-social, and while he does act according to a moral code, his sphere of action is hyper-local, and his moral code is derivative of

that assigned to the original Robin Hood, whose sphere of action was similarly hyper-local. The same goes for the Scarlet Pimpernel.

All three predate modern superheroes. All three established some of the modern trappings that today help to define superheroes, and they emerged much more proximally to the modern superhero than King Arthur. They are closer in appearance, function, and mission to superheroes than Arthur. And, yet, they are not considered superheroes. They weren't prodigious enough – they did not have the universal appeal of Arthur, his unprecedented rate of transmission, or the breadth and profundity of his mission and exploits.

Though they each had clear pro-social missions<sup>186</sup> and existed in recognizable real world settings, they operated in such hyper-specific local spheres – 19th century California, 18th century France, and the 15th century English countryside – so as to create distance between them and their readers. They also each occupied places of unambiguous privilege: Zorro pioneered the use of the mask and cape, as well as the use of a sobriquet that identifies his alter ego: Zorro, Spanish for “Fox.” He wears that mask and cape to hide the fact that he is Don Diego De La Vega, a Spanish-born (i.e. white) nobleman (the sobriquet “Don” comes from the Spanish, “De Origen Noble” – “of noble origin”) in Mexican California. The Scarlet Pimpernel introduced the trope of affecting a meek or ineffectual manner while in one's secret identity, which for him is English baronet Sir Percy Blakeney. As the Pimpernel, Blakeney rescues noblemen from the guillotine of the Reign of Terror in Revolutionary France. Likewise, since the 16th century, Robin Hood has been typed as a noble – Robin of Loxley – who was robbed of his family's holdings while crusading with 12th century king Richard the Lionhearted.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Doc Savage, in particular, has an oath which he recites each day, and which he requires each of his compatriots to recite, from Doc Savage #1, published in March of 1933: “Let me strive every moment of my life to make myself better and better, to the best of my ability, that all may profit by it. Let me think of the right and lend all my assistance to those who need it, with no regard for anything but justice. Let me take what comes with a smile, without loss of courage. Let me be considerate of my country, of my fellow citizens and my associates in everything I say and do. Let me do right to all, and wrong no man.”

<sup>187</sup> <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/richard-graftons-chronicle-at-large-1569>

These men move in the same social circles as the oppressive officials their alter egos oppose, and are the beneficiaries of a rigid class or caste system. Neither Zorro nor Sir Percy could topple the whole system because their public personae would be caught up in such revolutionary change (see: French Revolution). The revelation of Zorro's noble identity and Spanish heritage, in particular, would undercut any trust or goodwill he had earned from the people and would color any legitimate good he affected in the eyes of the general populace. If the class of Spanish nobles against whom Zorro fought could not be trusted, why trust one who wears a mask rather than fight the injustice openly?

Ah, but what of Zorro's inspiration? Coogan refers to Zorro, after all, as a Californian Robin Hood who championed "peasants oppressed by a corrupt government."<sup>188</sup> Coogan asserts that "the superhero code, a primary element of the hero's mission, probably finds its cultural archetype in the stories of Robin Hood, the outlaw who rights wrongs. Robin Hood follows his own code, ignoring the law, but meting out justice to the oppressors and alleviating the needs of the poor."<sup>189</sup> The earliest mention of Robin Hood crops up in 1377, notably before Malory pens Le Morte d'Arthur and ostensibly canonizes the image of a Camelot – with the Round Table at its center – as the idyllic white city on a hill. But there is a problem with this earliest known first reference to Robin Hood: It only mentions the *existence* of such a figure, *not* his altruistic mission to rob from the rich and give to the poor. The character first appeared in a form familiar to modern readers in a series of poems called *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which has been dated to 1450. However, even *if* a moral code is assigned to Robin Hood at the point of his earliest mention well into the late 15th century, the character was seen as no more than a murderer and a thief, and was not at all egalitarian. Shortly thereafter, when he acquired his noble trappings as

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<sup>188</sup> Evangelista, 637

<sup>189</sup> Coogan, 124

the gentleman bandit, the roots of his mission were still self-centered: However high-minded his crusade against the Sheriff of Nottingham may have become, it began from a place of revenge. It was the Sheriff – operating under the auspices of King John – who dispossessed Robin of his family holdings. Only the modern conception of Robin Hood “includes his stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, punishing evildoers, winning archery tournaments, and defending the English throne for his king. Many of these deeds ... date from as late as the 18th century” (Evangelista, 505-506). The egalitarian promise of Arthur’s fabled furniture, on the other hand, entered the conversation shortly after Geoffrey’s Historia – nearly three centuries before Robin Hood’s first mentions. Oh, and the idea of Camelot – that white city on a hill? It also predates any tales of a mission-driven Robin Hood.

Though not mentioned by name until Chretien de Troyes’ Lancelot (though it was only mentioned once and is not present in all manuscripts), the tradition of Arthur’s base of operations being a bright city in the Roman design goes back to Geoffrey’s depiction of the city of Caerleon in Historia. Camelot, as we imagine it today, became an Arthurian fixture in the 13th century, serving from then on as “the point of departure for Grail questers, and in the *Mort Artu* Gawain expressed his desire to be buried at Camelot, which had obviously become by that time the ideological, as well as the geographical center of the Arthurian world.”<sup>190</sup>

The heroes of ages past — such as the voracious Samson, the raging Hercules, the prideful Achilles, the conniving King David, and the propagandizing Alexander — fall short in having any kind of broad, pro-social mission. Arthur, even in his earliest figurations, represented something greater, be it the unification of warring tribes, the vision of Camelot as a white city on a hill, or the tenets of chivalry. Arthur in fact has several broad missions across the tradition that

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<sup>190</sup> Norris J. Lacy. “Camelot.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.



can easily be classified as pro-social, the most prominent of which is the Grail quest, with which he becomes associated in the middle of the 13th century.<sup>191</sup>

Another of Arthur's most prominent missions dates from quite early on in the Arthurian tradition: In leading a mixed force of Britons against the invading Saxons, he is typed as defending not only his nation, but the collective of nations native to Britain, against an outside force (not unlike Superman fighting for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," or Captain America, Namor the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, the first Flash, and Wonder Woman fighting Nazis). Arthur is protecting his society from the influences of or the conquest by a hostile power or powers, a theme echoed in the project of the Auchinleck. His mission, in that sense, is one of unification. In unifying Picts, Welsh, and British fighters (and if you believe the Castus argument, Sarmatian cavalry as well) against the invading Saxons, he was fighting for something greater than a hyper-local or personal cause.

Unlike Zorro, the Scarlet Pimpernel, The Shadow, The Phantom, King David, Alexander the Great, or Robin Hood, the stories of Arthur reached beyond the bounds of their nation of origin because of his broad, egalitarian, pro-social mission and adherence to a moral code. It was Arthur who changed the heroic into the superheroic, bringing the advent of the pro-social mission, becoming the first character to fit into Coogan's MPIC convention, and inhabiting each of the four roles of the heroes who prefigured him in antiquity. Arthur's was a phenomenon the world would not see again until a man in red and blue tights graced the cover of Action Comics #1.

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<sup>191</sup> In some texts, Arthur is even linked historically and genealogically to the bearer of the Grail himself, Joseph of Arimathea, who bore the story of Jesus to Western Europe, according to legend.

## **Part 4: A Hero Comes Home**

Out of the mist of history  
He'll come again  
Sailing on ships across the sea  
To a wounded Nation

Signs of a savior  
Like fire on the water  
It's what we prayed for  
One of our own

Just wait  
Though wide he may roam  
Always  
A hero comes home  
He goes where no one has gone  
But always  
A hero comes home

**– Idina Menzel, *A Hero Comes Home*  
(“Beowulf” Soundtrack, End Credits Version)**

## ***Chapter 13: 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. 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: His role as the once and future king. 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 "A whyle to hele me of my wounde," and when his remaining knight, Bedwere, visits Canterbury the next day, he sees the Archbishop tending to a fresh tomb, "coveryd it was with marboll graye/ And with Ryche lettres Rayled Aryght."<sup>192</sup> 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.'"<sup>193</sup> This speech by Bedivere seems to also have influenced the author of the text that appears in the Auchinleck, as similar words are echoed at the death of Arthur on the battlefield:

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

<sup>192</sup> J. Douglas Bruce. Le Morte Arthur. London: EETS, 1903. ll. 3504-5

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., ll. 3550-3

&, to ek þat, ye slouȝ so fele  
 þat half no miȝt y me bistere.<sup>7</sup>  
 þo sayden our oþer hem bitvene,  
 Most he libben & ythen,  
 Bitvene Breteine & Costentin noble  
 No worþ anoþer kniȝt so noble.<sup>194</sup>

In another of Malory's sources, the French romance *La Mort le Roi Artu*, there is an epitaph that looks to build upon what had previously been simple eulogizing, as it takes steps towards the final leonine hexameter Latin epitaph<sup>195</sup> that Malory writes: "CI GIST LI ROIS ARTUS QUI PAR SA VALEUR MIST EN SA SUBJECTION .XII. RIOAUMES."<sup>196</sup> While sources point toward a late-15th century composition of this work and its now-famous epitaph<sup>197</sup>, 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.<sup>198</sup>

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 its mystique of *Romanitas* (civilization) and the idea of the *Restitutor Orbis* with it.<sup>199</sup> This Roman concept likely serves as the root for the Celtic oral tradition of a returning hero, which in turn served as inspiration for Malory's famous epitaph. While Malory's sources largely disagree on whether or not Arthur is dead at the end of the story, Malory acknowledges what was by then the long-standing Celtic oral tradition of a returning hero by allowing for the possibility of Arthur's survival.

<sup>194</sup> *Of Arthour and of Merlin*. Auchinleck MS, ll. 9556-67

<sup>195</sup> John Withrington. "The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's 'Morte Darthur'." *Arthurian Literature VII*. Comp. Richard Barber. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 1987.

<sup>196</sup> *La Mort le Roi Artu: Roman du XIII Siècle*, ed. Jean Frappier. Paris: Parris 1936.

<sup>197</sup> 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.

<sup>198</sup> Ashe, Geoffrey. *The Discovery of King Arthur*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985.

<sup>199</sup> 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*

Arthur's redemption of his kingly predecessors' flaws, his rebooted Auchinleck narrative, and his broad pro-social mission and moral code alloy the ancient heroes and the royal heroes into a singular figure, who has had an impact on Western culture unlike any other singular figure.

The abilities Arthur displays—at times superhuman strength and durability, tactical genius, and a connection to the mystical/magical—are the same abilities we see in modern superheroes. The same roles he shares with previous heroes—the Outsider, the Boy King, the Warrior King, and the Giant Slayer—are also integral to the most successful characterizations of the most popular of modern day superheroes. The phenomenon of the Arthurian Text provided the necessary combination and elision of previous 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. Arthur's grand pro-social **Mission** 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 art on Arthur's shield fulfills an embryonic form of the **Chevron**, not only representing Arthur and his mission, but his rank and heritage. His later heraldic shields gesture at his mission of unification:

“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.”<sup>200</sup>

Like Captain America, who wears the flag of the United States on his shield (or Wonder Woman, who debuted as an anti-fascist character decked out in star-spangled briefs), Arthur also

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<sup>200</sup> Helmut Nickel. “Heraldry.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

bears the image of a red dragon upon his shield.<sup>201</sup> Though he is later typed as an English hero—not a British one—the legacy of the Pendragon continues on as a subtext which recalls his Welsh origins. Accepting the dragon as Arthur’s chevron, how can Arthur be said to have a **costume**, especially one that evokes his biography? For this, one has only to turn to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s description of Arthur’s armor – in particular, his helmet, which features a crest of the dragon:

Arthur himself, having put on a coat of mail suitable to the grandeur of so powerful a king, placed a golden helmet upon his head, on which was engraven the figure of a dragon ... Then girding on his Caliburn, which was an excellent sword made in the isle of Avallon, he graced his right hand with his lance, named Ron, which was hard, broad, and fit for slaughter.<sup>202</sup>

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 the wizard Shazam. 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. That, though, is a bit tenuous. The stronger case: If his name does in fact mean “The Bear” (or if he is the Boar of Cornwall) or considers Arthur’s “Pendragon” – “head dragon” – appellation as his *nome de guerre*, combined with the fact that he rides into battle behind either the dragon pennant of a Roman legion or a shield with the coiled red beast, 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, are comic book superhero stories arguably more popular than ever? Because

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<sup>201</sup> Frank D. Reno. The Historic King Arthur: Authenticating the Celtic Hero of Post-Roman Britain. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996. pp. 264.

<sup>202</sup> Historia, Book IX, Ch. 4.

they are following in the footsteps of Arthur now more faithfully than ever. Their stories are being told by people who revered them as children, who treat them with respect, dignity, and care. 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.”

It’s no wonder why superheroes generate such absurdly high box office receipts, why studios are banking entire summers on do-gooders in tights. It could be that movie-making technology has finally caught up to impossible splash-page action sequences that would have been impossible to film even just 30 years ago. It could be the fact that the superhero genre is comfortable, a place where consumers from all walks of life and all levels of society have already been conditioned to suspend our disbelief. It could be — as theorized by many academics attempting to uncover the reason for the popularity of the recent comic book superhero boom — any number of complicated, obtuse, and nuanced reasons. Or it could be something as simple as the fact that with the majority of comic book superheroes, we’ve seen these stories before. Yes, ‘before’ in the surface sense — we read comic books when we were children — but more fundamentally, ‘before’ in the larger historical sense. Perhaps the same world that is lapping up comic book superhero stories now is doing so because we have seen these same stories before, albeit in an attire wholly different from tights and capes. In the form of these modern comic book superheroes, Arthur has seemingly fulfilled his promised return.

## ***Chapter 14: 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. 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,” writes 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.”

In a show of strength designed to quell rumors that William of Orange had moved on James II and that there would soon be a new king (thereby nullifying Andros’s authority), Andros had hired mercenary troops to quell uprisings in the city.<sup>203</sup> It’s a tale certainly worth chronicling in its own right, but Hawthorne adds a twist to the story of the colonists’ revolt.

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<sup>203</sup> Coogan 148



Hawthorne writes that former governor Simon Bradstreet 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. 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 ***beseeking this favor earnestly of the Lord, it was vouchsafed me to appear once again on earth***, in the good old cause of his saints.

Hawthorne writes that, 80 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”), 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 forward and backwards. Forward, in that it prefigures the naming conventions – the *noms de guerre* – and pro-social mission of Superman and his ilk. Backward in that it not only reaches back across the Atlantic, but further than the Great Britain of the 17th century, already over a century and a half ago by the time Hawthorne was writing. The Gray Champion reaches back to the still wild and untamed Britannia of the sixth century.

First, take his 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.<sup>204</sup> However, there are two

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<sup>204</sup> Evangelista, 493

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 a Roman *spatha*, which would have been the weapon of choice for most of Arthur’s likely sub-Roman historical counterparts.

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 much heavier than either the rapier or the smallsword. Both broadsword and *spatha* were made for hacking and slashing into armor from horseback, not the intricate on-foot thrusting and parrying of rapier swordplay.

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 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:

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 hove a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur. Now put me into the barge, said the king. And so he did softly; and there received him three queens with great mourning; and so they set them down, and in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head.

**And then that queen said: Ah, dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me?** alas, this wound on your head hath caught over-much cold. And so then they rowed from the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all those ladies go from him. Then Sir Bedivere cried: **Ah my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies? Comfort thyself, said the king, and do as well as thou mayst, for in me is no trust for to trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound:** and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul.

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 the colonies here addressed are that of New England (as opposed to the England across the Atlantic, and therefore implying a new beginning), or even that there is perhaps a gesture to a sense of the new evolving out of and then replacing the old (therefore England's heroes of old become the heroes of New England). It is the idea that this Champion exists to fight domestic tyranny and invasion. These are the very missions to which Arthur is dedicated, both historically and literarily.

The historical figure on which Hawthorne is thought to have based his Champion, the Angel of Hadley, was in reality General William Goffe, who “in 1675 is reported to have suddenly appeared, rallied the inhabitants of Hadley, Massachusetts, and led them against an Indian attack ... did engage in violent repulse of an enemy, and as one of the signers of the death warrant against King Charles I in the English Civil War, he certainly has a violent history behind him, albeit an untextual one.”<sup>205</sup> It was by the same mechanism that King Arthur sprung from tales of some unifying, violent warrior chieftain of sub-Roman Wales. That violent history is elided 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.

These echoes of the Arthurian are the first whispers of the age of superheroes. What this little-known Hawthorne work has provided is yet another historical bridge. When we began, we addressed current scholarship which has established that superheroes were descendants of the ancient heroes, with an empty gap of nearly 3,000 years between the two traditions. With Arthur as the missing link, 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 shrunk again to nearly 200 years. Little did Hawthorne suspect that merely 103 years after he penned his short story, that another Champion would arise. Except this one would not be clothed in either plate armor or the austere garb of an old Puritan, but a shocking attire of blue and yellow, with a flowing red cape.

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<sup>205</sup> Coogan, 150

***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***

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.<sup>206</sup> This character's story was elemental allegory, something which captured the popular zeitgeist in a universally understandable language. He 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.<sup>207</sup> The first glimpse the world got of this new red, white, and blue hero made quite a splash: The cover art featured Captain America delivering a right cross to Adolf Hitler's jaw, drawn by the legendary Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (Joseph Henry Simon and Jacob Kurtzberg, two more sons of Jewish immigrants).

With the pro-social mission firmly established by Arthur, and the other pieces of superhero definition falling into place by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the time was ripe for Arthur's return, except his armor was replaced by spandex, and the magical sword Excalibur was

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<sup>206</sup> Scott Beatty. "Alien Races and Worlds." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

<sup>207</sup> Carl Burgos (w,a), Paul Gustavson (w,a), and Bill Everett (w, a). Marvel Comics #1 (Oct. 1939), Timely Comics (Marvel Comics).

replaced by a discus-shaped shield. 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 to his editor, Tim Goodman, the response was less than stellar: “You say that he’s a teenager? A hero can only be an adult! Teenagers are sidekicks!” What Goodman didn’t realize at the time was that almost all superheroes were, like Arthur, Boy Kings who came across their Mission when they were children. Superman, for one, came to Earth as an infant. In 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.<sup>208</sup>

The television series “Smallville” deals with Superman’s origin narrative by looking at the Man of Steel during his teen years. Like other adolescents around him, he has to negotiate the changes coming with puberty, although for young Clark Kent, hair growing in funny places is the least of his problems.<sup>209</sup>

The man behind the flag-adorned costume was Steve Rogers, an aspiring art student 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 thin, sickly, and scrawny in the opening panels of

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<sup>208</sup> Action Comics #1

<sup>209</sup> Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:25:48.

the book — and he was summarily declared 4-F, unfit for combat. Unbeknownst to Rogers, off in the shadows, a man named Dr. Erskine whispers to a general that this young man would be perfect for a new experiment called Project: Rebirth.

Rogers is secreted off to a top-secret installation, where a Dr. Reinstein 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 Reinstein, who takes the secrets of the process to his grave.

Rogers, now the only Super Soldier, is given the mantle of Captain America, and is placed within the ranks of the army as a bumbling, uncoordinated goof — the butt of his unit’s jokes (dye his hair black and give him glasses and he may as well have been Clark Kent). Rogers 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, though his commanding officer thought of him as “a lazy incompetent and could never understand why the highers-up kept excusing Rogers’s repeated disappearances.”<sup>210</sup> In a very real sense, Rogers was pretending to be the “squire,” the uninitiated warrior, but is really in fact the “king,” as it were—very much like a young Arthur.

Additionally, because of the Serum’s side effects, Rogers had remained eternally young, stuck in his late twenties or early thirties until he was assassinated, at which point the Serum broke down, causing his body to rapidly age.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Peter Sanderson and Les Daniels. Marvel Universe. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1996. pp. 101

<sup>211</sup> Ed Brubaker (w) and Steve Epting (p). “Death of the Dream.” Captain America Vol. 4 #26 (May 2007), Marvel Comics.



## Warrior Kings

“I'm holding out for a hero till the end of the night  
he's gotta be strong and he's gotta be fast  
and he's gotta be fresh from the fight”

—Emery, *Holding Out for a Hero*

As a warrior, Superman uses his physical abilities—great strength, ice breath, heat beams from his eyes, super speed, and flight—to defeat threats both exterior and interior in relation to his adopted home country. In his earliest issues, he battles social ills and corruption, a battle which evokes the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. In a more abstract sense, Superman constantly wishes to belong to the human community, even though he never can. In a sense, his never-ending battle as the champion of Earth is a Grail quest in itself, except he seeks not the Cup of Christ, but a sense of belonging.<sup>212</sup>

In an era where nuclear war and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust loomed large, Superman fought mad scientists. When corporate moguls emerged as the dominant cultural villains, Superman's arch-nemesis Lex Luthor took on that form, abandoning the trappings of a mad scientist.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, as Arthur moved through time and cultures, he fought enemies ranging from Saxons to Muslim Saracens to other foreigners. As the Angles and Saxons became the English, English writers turned Arthur's sword against *their* enemies. His character function evolved with the times so that his enemies were that of the culture he inhabited, just like Captain America—though not Steve Rogers—ended up fighting Communists in the 1950s.

Captain America is, at root, a soldier. In many early stories, he carries and uses guns and flamethrowers, though after he was revived, he showed a particular distaste for lethal force,

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<sup>212</sup> B.J. Oropeza. "Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise." *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*. Ed. B.J. Oropeza. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005. pp. 5-6.

<sup>213</sup> *Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:12:06.

preferring instead to use his fists and his shield—a defensive weapon—to disable or neutralize a threat.<sup>214</sup> 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 S shield logo (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.).<sup>215</sup>

Captain America’s disc-shaped shield (likely the form of any shield a historical Arthur would have used)<sup>216</sup> 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, the source of some of the earliest Arthur traditions.

## Giant Slayers

Though giant slaying is easily identified throughout any and all historic narratives, the specific role of Giant Slayer vis a vis Arthur and superheroes is to serve as an exemplar to those they are to lead: In their greatest and most consequential battles, they are the underdog and face long odds. They are battling something larger and more powerful than themselves, whether that power is expressed as political, cultural, financial, or the literally physical.

Though Superman certainly fights his fair share of gigantic foes – elemental giants bent on excising the alien from the planet Earth.<sup>217</sup> – recall that in his first adventures, he contends with corruption and graft, as shown in the pages of Action Comics #1.

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<sup>214</sup> Ethan Sacks. "Captain America Lives Again." Daily News 28 Jan 2008 3 May 2008  
<[http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/arts/2008/01/28/2008-01-28\\_captain\\_america\\_lives\\_again.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/arts/2008/01/28/2008-01-28_captain_america_lives_again.html)>.

<sup>215</sup> Mark Waid (w) and Dave Gibbons (a). Super Soldier #1 (Apr. 1996), Amalgam Comics.

<sup>216</sup> Helmut Nickel. "Arms and Armor." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

<sup>217</sup> Brian Azzarello (w), Jim Lee (p), Scott Williams (i). "Superman For Tomorrow." Superman #209 (Sept. 2004), DC Comics.

As a bonafide giant-slayer, Cap fights the Incredible Hulk in his first mission as field general of the Avengers, in Avengers #4. Literally and figuratively, he fights the Nazis and their fascist ideologies. His greatest foe – the Red Skull – is the embodiment of everything that Hitler stood for. He is the opposite to Rogers in every possible way. Every battle Rogers fights against the Skull is a battle against evil itself. In Marvel's Civil War, Captain America opposes the implementation of the Superhuman Registration Act, which would require superheroes to be monitored and trained by the government (not unlike him). Despite the fact that it would establish his own experience as standard practice, he realized that a centralized database of secret identities would be catastrophic for heroes who rely on their anonymity to ensure their safety and the safety of their loved ones.

In both Superman and Captain America, we see a variety of ways in which the four roles can be fulfilled. In a post-modern world getting smaller and faster by the day, one single hero cannot contain all of the Arthurian weight. So, the two naturally diverge from one another—still maintaining the moral code and the mission, but differing in their methods and their processes. This mirrors how comics as a whole have negotiated the role of Outsider, a loaded label for a role in which many see superheroes falling short.

## ***Chapter 16: Turning Pain Into Power***

### **How Superheroes Renegotiate the Terms of Outsidership and Otherness**

When you've 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***

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 horrifically grotesque, as illustrated by the abduction, rape, brainwashing, and forced impregnation of Carol Danvers in *Avengers* #200, while her Avengers teammates congratulate her and applaud her sudden decision to forgive her abuser and head off happily into the sunset with him.<sup>218</sup>

I could list all the ways 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. But, recall what I wrote *way* 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

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<sup>218</sup> Further reading: <http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/index.html>

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’ 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 Jewish immigrants who had fled persecution in Europe. 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 Kansas. Chunks of his very homeworld – radioactive Kryptonite – are lethal to him. He doesn’t really *belong* anywhere, and his greatest enemy, Lex Luthor, constantly reminds him of that.<sup>219</sup> 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 akimbo, declaring confidently 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.<sup>220</sup> Even among his own people, Superman is ostracized. In DC’s 2008-09 story arc, “New Krypton,”<sup>221</sup> Superman is told by his own aunt, Alura In-Ze, that he is

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<sup>219</sup> 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.”

<sup>220</sup> Jeph Loeb (w), Tim Sale (pencil), Bjarne Hansen (ink). Superman for All Seasons. Ed. Dale Crane. New York: DC Comics, 1999. pp. 120-121.

<sup>221</sup> Johns, Geoff. “New Krypton.” *Action Comics Vol. 1*, no. 873, DC, March 2009.

not even welcome on his reborn homeworld. His home away from Metropolis is the Fortress of Solitude, with different versions 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 was about to fall under the boot 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 (real name Chaim Witz, born in Israel), 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 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.”<sup>222</sup>

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, which, awash in centuries of simmering antisemitism, was enthralled by the propaganda of Adolf Hitler. 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.

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<sup>222</sup> 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

The character's *nomme de guerre*, too, figures into Superman's relationship with Otherness. "Superman" or "übermensch" originated as an intentionally nebulous and vague term coined by German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche in 1883. Nietzsche's writings were subsequently twisted and appropriated by the Nazis, who used them to justify their own notions of racial purity and Aryan superiority.<sup>223</sup> Yet, instead of being Aryan – with blond hair and blue eyes – Superman had the fair skin, dark hair, and light eyes of an Eastern European Jew.

Even though Superman never explicitly fought Nazis – as Captain America did – Hitler's chief propagandist Josef Goebbels was quoted in *Das Schwarz Korps* – the SS's weekly newspaper – as saying: "Jerry Siegelack [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. As the decades wore on, Superman writers leaned even further into another layer of outsidership: Superman was an adopted orphan, not unlike T.H. White's Wart – the young Arthur who pulls the sword from the stone in The Once and Future King.

Despite his enemies' use 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 his new planet, he became – in a sense – an aspirational figure for newer Americans. He was also the ideal immigrant for readers whose families had long since moved past their migratory history and

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<sup>223</sup> Additional reading: [https://philosophynow.org/issues/148/Men\\_of\\_Steel\\_Superman\\_vs\\_Ubermensch](https://philosophynow.org/issues/148/Men_of_Steel_Superman_vs_Ubermensch)

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 name, just like 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.

### **The Man Out of Time**

Captain America, despite his remarkable abilities and government sponsorship, is an outsider in many different respects, though not all so evident as Superman’s extraterrestrial biology. While in today’s America, being of Irish descent is unremarkable, it wasn’t that long ago that Irish immigrants – like Steve Rogers’ parents – were discriminated against with the same venom 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 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: 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 digital comic series produced for promotion of 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 Projekt *Urbemensch*. They would not survive.<sup>224</sup>

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 immigrants. Like Cap, their forebears had been discriminated against, excluded, disenfranchised, and either slaughtered or exiled. 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.

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<sup>224</sup>Van Lente, Fred. *Captain America: First Vengeance*, Part 2. Marvel Comics, March, 2011.

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.

In 1964, after the introduction of heroes with problems like the Fantastic Four—whose identities were public—and Spider-Man—whose powers made his life as Peter Parker a living hell—Lee and his old friend Jack Kirby decided to bring the old soldier back, and in the pages of Avengers #4, the Star-Spangled Avenger leads Thor, Giant Man, the Wasp, and Iron Man into battle. It had been 20 years since Cap had last thrown a punch, and Lee largely ignored his 1950's 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 – also provided the character with a new sense of pathos: His sidekick Bucky ostensibly perished. 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.

“He felt he didn’t belong to our age,” Lee said. “He was, as they say, an anachronism. He belonged back in the ‘40’s. Jack hadn’t done him that way, and I felt a little bit diffident mentioning it to him, but oh, man, Jack loved the idea.” Cap’s alienation mirrored that of a nation in the midst of its own identity crisis. 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.<sup>225</sup>

And yet, despite feeling alienated because of the 20 years of history he missed, Cap doesn’t act recklessly, angrily, or destructively. His form of ‘rebellion’ is fighting for the ideals 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.

Former Batman editor Denny O’Neil realized this in 1988, when a telephone poll at the back of a Batman comic allowed readers to vote on whether or not the second Robin – the ill-received Jason Todd – would perish at the hands of the Joker, who captured Todd in that same

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<sup>225</sup> 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.

issue. The public narrowly voted in favor of Todd's demise, resulting in decades of rich emotional storylines stemming from Batman's guilt.

"I thought I was a guy writing and editing fiction," former Batman writer Denny O'Neil said about the reactions he got after DC killed off the second Robin, Jason Todd. "I never realized that, no, the Batman editor and the Superman editor, we are more than that. We are the custodians of folklore."<sup>226</sup>

## **The Amazon**

In early superhero comic books, there is no greater outsider than Diana of Themyscira, otherwise known as Diana Prince or Wonder Woman. Her creator, Dr. William Moulton Marsten, 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!"<sup>227</sup> 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, male Arthur (bastard and orphan though he was) ... She was (gasp!) a woman.

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 1:11:09

<sup>227</sup> 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/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/).

When critics claimed Wonder Woman wasn't sufficiently dressed, Gaines hired renowned child neuropsychologist Dr. Laretta 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 an 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 a 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, 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, responding 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.”<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> 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/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/).

We've already covered what those hearings wrought – the dismissal of superhero comics as literature and as a serious artform – but there was collateral damage, as well: This was the era of McCarthyism, when anybody 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," such blacklisting would be 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.

## ***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**

I've been reading books of old  
 The legends and the myths  
 Achilles and his gold  
 Hercules and his gifts  
 Spider-Man's control  
 And Batman with his fists  
 And clearly I don't see myself upon that list

### **–Coldplay and the Chainsmokers, *Something Like This***

In 2003, the Marvel limited series Truth: Red, White, and Black introduced the dark legacy of Project: Rebirth, the process that turned Steve Rogers into Captain America. Taking inspiration from the aftermath of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the story follows one of the only survivors of an all-Black regiment of soldiers – some 300 men – who were forced to act as test subjects in a joint effort by the American, British, and German scientists to recreate the lost Super Soldier process that Dr. Erskine took to his grave. The man at the center of the story – Isaiah Bradley – is one of the few who escape alive and free from mutation.

In order to stop the Germans from succeeding in creating their own super soldier, Bradley takes a spare Captain America costume and shield and crosses enemy lines to destroy the Nazi lab at a concentration camp. While successful, he is captured and nearly dissected by Nazi scientists before being rescued by German insurgents. For his efforts, he is court-martialed and imprisoned in Leavenworth from 1943 until 1960, disavowed and forgotten. By the time he is released, he is greatly diminished and damaged – both physically and psychologically – as a

result of the experiments. By the time Rogers finds out the truth of all this and finds Bradley for a long-overdue reconciliation, Alzheimers has reduced Bradley to a childlike state.

Though Isaiah's grandson Elijah becomes The Patriot – a Captain America-inspired member of the Young Avengers who uses one of Cap's old triangular shields – it took more than a decade until Steve Rogers' longtime sidekick Sam Wilson (who debuted as the Falcon in 1969) took over as the Marvel Universe's first proper Black Captain America.

Up until the last 25 years, superhero comics have been overwhelmingly dominated by cis, white, heterosexual men. The digital age has opened up the space for a vast spectrum of marginalized communities to express their own stories through web comics or independent publishers. Major publishers have been somewhat slower to come around – larger ships are harder to steer, especially since publishers today are part of massive publicly-held and bottom-line-driven companies like Disney and Warner Brothers – but still, today's comic book superheroes resemble their readership more and more with each passing year.

Since the turn of the 21st century, we have seen the emergence of not only a Black Captain America, but a Black-Latinx Spider-Man, a female African-American science prodigy armoring up to replace Iron Man as Iron Heart, LGBTQIA+ and Lebanese Green Lanterns, a lesbian Jewish Batwoman (Bruce Wayne's cousin on his mother's side, Kate Kane), the elevation of the once-scantly-clad Carol Danvers from Ms. Marvel to Captain Marvel (taking over the title of her onetime abusive boyfriend) and the introduction of a new teenage Muslim Ms. Marvel – Kamala Khan – whose attire respects and pays homage to her cultural heritage.<sup>229</sup>

That flowering of representation has coincided with a similarly rapid expansion in the amount of public and academic discourse surrounding – among other things – race, ethnicity,

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<sup>229</sup> "Stewart, McKelvie & More Talk Costume Design In Modern Comics". *Comic Book Resources*. Archived from the original on June 2, 2016. Retrieved February 14, 2019.



gender identity, sexual equality, the pay gap between men and women, sexual assault, sexual violence, power dynamics, colonialism, objectification, sexualization, trauma, and the different forms hate speech can take. It was, in fact, at the height of that turmoil – the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests following the murder of George Floyd – that Sam Wilson’s live-action counterpart, portrayed by Anthony Mackie, officially took up Steve Rogers’ shield as the new Captain America in the Disney+ limited series, “Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” following on the heels of Rogers handing it to him at the conclusion of “Avengers: Endgame” (2019).

A few months after the series finale debuted, Mackie gave an exclusive to Angelique Jackson of *Variety*:

“A friend of mine is a teacher down in Homestead, Florida, and she works with special needs kids,” Mackie tells *Variety*, explaining that, one day, the teacher found one of her students doing pull ups on the monkey bars. “She’s like, ‘What are you doing? You’re gonna hurt yourself.’ And the kid tells her, ‘Well, Captain America looks like me now, so I need to get in shape, if he needs my help.’ And I thought that was the coolest thing.”

“For this kid to see a six-hour series and get enough strength within himself to think that he needs to be prepared and ready, that made all of the work that we had to do to put it together worthwhile for me,” he adds.

When it came time for the character to deliver his first big monologue as Captain America, Mackie made sure to drill deep into what it meant to be a Black man wearing the stars and stripes.

“This is the moment where he becomes Captain America, so what’s his Captain America going to stand for?” Mackie explains. “Because he was a soldier, he was a caretaker of soldiers, a counselor, he’s not the guy who’s going to bust his way through problems.”

“The humanitarian side of him was something that I feel is his superpower, his ability to have empathy and sympathy for those around him is your superpower,” Mackie continues. “So that monologue was about him showing that if one of us is mistreated, we’re all to blame. And that’s the overall theme of the new Captain

America, not that not Black Cap, or Cap for the people, he's Captain America for all."<sup>230</sup>

Just as Cap evolved with America, so too did Superman. In October of 2021, shortly after comics' new Superman – Kal El's half-human son Jon – was confirmed to be bisexual, legendary DC writer, editor, and artist Jim Lee – in his role as DC Comics' publisher and chief creative officer – announced that Superman's famous motto, "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," would be updated. The new tagline would be: "Truth, Justice, and a Better Tomorrow."

There were think pieces written across the media spectrum, from *Variety*<sup>231</sup> to *The Wrap*<sup>232</sup> to Fox News. Fox contributor Raymond Arroyo said that removing "the American Way" from the motto was "a disservice to fans," and that DC would rather "politically grandstand than respect the audience that built" Superman. In the article accompanying a video of Arroyo's comments on "The Big Sunday Show," writer Joshua Q. Nelson wrote that the "iconic comic-book character Superman has stood for 'truth, justice and the American way' for over 80 years."<sup>233</sup> Except, he hasn't.

Prior to the United States officially entering World War II, the Superman serial cartoons by Fleischer Studios introduced the Man of Steel with a narration declaring that he engaged "in a never-ending battle for truth and justice." Full stop. In fact, "and the American Way" was introduced during the first episode of "The Wolfe" saga in Superman's ongoing radio series in 1942. It remained part of the show until the end of the war. In the 1948 "Superman" serial starring Kirk Alyn, Pa Kent told Clark to use his powers in the interest of "Truth, Tolerance and

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<sup>230</sup> Jackson, Angelique. "Anthony Mackie Talks Becoming Captain America and the Importance of Black Heroes (Exclusive)." *Variety*, 8 June 2021, <https://www.variety.com/video/anthony-mackie-captain-america-air-force-general-charles-brown/>.

<sup>231</sup> Vary, Adam B. "Superman Changes Motto to 'Truth, Justice and a Better Tomorrow,' Says DC Chief." *Variety.com*, *Variety*, 17 Oct. 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/superman-new-motto-dc-fandome-1235090712/>

<sup>232</sup> Ortiz, Andi, and Ross A. Lincoln. "Superman's Catchphrase Drops 'the American Way.'" *TheWrap*, 16 Oct. 2021, [www.thewrap.com/superman-catchphrase-changed-truth-justice-better-tomorrow/](https://www.thewrap.com/superman-catchphrase-changed-truth-justice-better-tomorrow/).

<sup>233</sup> Nelson, Joshua Q. "DC Comics blasted for changing Superman's 'American Way' motto: 'A distortion and a disservice to fans'." *Fox News*, 18 Oct. 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/superman-motto-american-way-dc-comics-arroyo-terrell>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

Justice.” The “American Way” portion of the motto was revived during the 1950s television show, “The Adventures of Superman,” starring George Reeves, but wasn’t included in Superman lore until decades later, and even then, the only real consistent elements of Superman’s motto were “Truth and Justice.” Still, when the motto officially changed, there was a firestorm of criticism on social media, featuring accusations of anti-Americanism, political correctness run amok, “woke”ness, virtue signaling, and pandering.<sup>234</sup>

When director James Gunn tweeted about the influences for his upcoming film, originally titled “Superman: Legacy,” he cited the motto as a way of gesturing at the influence of Superman’s Kansan parents. Conservative film critic Christian Toto told Fox News Digital:

"The Superman motto restoration is a very minor item, but it didn't happen in a vacuum. Hollywood is slowly realizing how off-putting woke theatrics can be, and the Biden economy is making studios pinch pennies in every possible way. If that means appeasing a huge swath of comic book fans eager for an old-school, all-American Superman, so be it."<sup>235</sup>

With each new addition of a minority hero, each new take on a legacy hero (a version of the original Green Lantern, Alan Scott, was retconned as gay in 2012<sup>236</sup>) or the gender swapping of a previously male character (either on the page or on film), the same flood of protest is unleashed. The common refrain among the aggrieved: *Keep your politics/religion out of my entertainment*, or, to put a finer point on it: *Keep your views I disagree with out of my entertainment and my kids’ entertainment*. To put it in needlepoint on a pillow: *I don’t want to think, so don’t challenge me with any new ideas. Isn’t this supposed to be for kids, anyway?*

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<sup>234</sup> Younis, Steve. “The History of Superman’s ‘Truth and Justice’ Motto.” *Superman Homepage - Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about the Man of Steel... and More!*, 21 Oct. 2021, [www.supermanhomepage.com/the-history-of-supermans-truth-and-justice-motto/](http://www.supermanhomepage.com/the-history-of-supermans-truth-and-justice-motto/).

<sup>235</sup> Hall, Alexander. “Upcoming Superman Movie Restores ‘American Way’ Phrase to Famous Motto.” Fox News, FOX News Network, 16 Mar. 2023, [www.foxnews.com/media/upcoming-superman-movie-restores-american-way-phrase-famous-motto](http://www.foxnews.com/media/upcoming-superman-movie-restores-american-way-phrase-famous-motto).

<sup>236</sup> Robinson, James. “Earth-2 #3.” DC Comics, September 2012

The fact is that our heroic narratives have been intertwined with politics, religion, race, gender, philosophy, power, and the examination of those subjects since the days of King Arthur. That's what good literature does: It asks questions; it makes readers uncomfortable; it forces readers to examine their own notions, attitudes, and previously-held beliefs; and it begs readers to consider those of others. That function of literature is why comic books were pushed into the "childish things" box – handcuffed by the CCA – in the first place: The idea that children (or the uneducated and those with unrefined taste) can and should only consume light and simple, mindless entertainment. Admitting that comics were more than just a mindless diversion would have meant admitting that children and adolescents were capable of abstract thought and could (perhaps *should*) indeed be exposed to such elevated cultural conversations – conversations that some adults would rather not have. That is the very essence of what Geertz called the acted culture of folk stories – it is their cultural memory, their cultural baggage, and their interface with the real world that make them every bit as literary as the sainted high-culture "masters," if not moreso.

"Truth, Justice, and the American Way" is not nearly as monolithic or foundational as some would think. Given both Captain America and Superman's origins as responses to the inherited trauma of generational bigotry, Superman's dream of a world of acceptance, dignity, honor, and justice is the thematic framework upon which these heroes' timelessness is built. The same can be said of the X-Men, whose so-called "wokeness" has been baked into the conceit of the mutant superhero team since its inception.<sup>237</sup>

When Marvel Studios released a continuation of the wildly popular 1990s cartoon "X-Men: The Animated Series," it included a character named Morph, who could change into

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<sup>237</sup> Deedy, Jenna. "Newsflash: X-Men Has Always Been 'Woke'." *Geeks*, Feb. 2024, <https://vocal.media/geeks/newsflash-x-men-has-always-been-woke>. Accessed 17 April 2024.

anyone – male or female. While Morph has been around since debuting in the original animated series in 1992, in the run-up to the release of “X-Men ‘97,” he was announced as being non-binary – not all that surprising considering he constantly tries on not only different faces and bodies, but different genders and sexes every time he shapeshifts.<sup>238</sup> Those claiming that the X-Men had gone “woke” didn’t step back and realize that the X-Men hadn’t *gone* anywhere: Diversity, discrimination, prejudice, tolerance, oppression, marginalized communities, and change were always part of the X-Men’s DNA. They take up a conversation about the relationship between Outsidership, Othership, and heroism that’s been going on ever since a Roman *dux bellorum*-cum-Celtic folk hero became a devout Christian Englishman carrying the image of the Virgin Mary<sup>239</sup> upon his shield.<sup>240</sup> Yes, over the last 1,500 years, Arthur has done some shapeshifting of his own.

Before Arthur was an Other solely by way of the circumstances of his birth and his age, he was every bit the alien Kal El is – clothed in strange garb, speaking a strange tongue, and wielding unearthly technology (with an unwieldy name). Some of the early names for the sword Excalibur – Anglicized/Romanized/Latinized from the original Welsh – have been interpreted to contain some root representing the word ‘lightning,’ which many peoples of (the historical) Arthur’s time would have seen as a supernatural force. Lightning bolts were weapons wielded by the gods, including Beli of the native pagan Britons. Excalibur – which cast brilliant rays of light to defeat enemies – is, in some linguistic interpretations, descended from a sword whose name meant “the sword of Beli.”<sup>241</sup> Over time, though, Excalibur transformed from a pagan,

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<sup>238</sup> Tinoco, Armando. “‘X-Men ‘97’ Morph Voice Actor on Backlash over Describing Character as Non-Binary: ‘It Didn’t Surprise Me at All.’” *Deadline*, Deadline, 24 Mar. 2024, [deadline.com/2024/03/x-men-97-morph-backlash-over-character-non-binary-1235867032/](https://deadline.com/2024/03/x-men-97-morph-backlash-over-character-non-binary-1235867032/).

<sup>239</sup> Langtoft’s chronicles: Northern England, c. 1307 - c. 1327, Royal MS 20 a ii, f. 4r

<sup>240</sup> *Historia*, Book IX, Ch. 1; Earlier sources use “shoulder” instead of “shield”. In the *Annales Cambriae* and Nennius’s *Historia Brittonum* (800 C.E.), the word used is the Welsh *ysqwyd*, which means shoulder. Confusion probably arose in the translation from the original Welsh to Geoffrey’s Latin because of the linguistic proximity to the Welsh word for shield, which is *ysqwyd*.

<sup>241</sup> Darrah, John. *Paganism in Arthurian Romance*. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1994. pp. 102.

Romano-Briton mark of office for a native warrior chieftain who fought back invaders, into a figuration of the Cross stuck upright in an anvil in a churchyard. By the time the Auchinleck was written, Excalibur had long since been appropriated by the descendants of those same invaders it once repulsed, and then used against the very peoples in whose folklore it originated. The Auchinleck's project of nationalizing Arthur and its furtherance of him as a singular example of Christian kingship was merely a continuation of that same process.

Arthur's transformation from a folk hero born out of the pagan, native cultures of Britain into a Christian savior-king of the English nation shows the kind of real-world power a superhero can have when they take on nationalist tropes and patriotic power. Yet, that is not their native tongue. Arthur and superheroes are by their very nature Outsiders and Others. They defy what is, whether it is the legal or political status quo or an accepted injustice of circumstance. And, Because of their position as Outsiders, they are uniquely positioned to actively and affirmatively choose a different destiny for themselves or the world they inhabit than what fate would otherwise have had in store.<sup>242</sup> That is a key attribute of the most enduring heroic figures: The choice to actively choose to defy fate, to resist, to change their stars. Sounds a lot like a Text, no?

Beyond changing their own fate, Arthur and superheroes must be Outsiders because outsiders are excluded from participating in existing power structures, allowing them to serve as intermediaries. Because they do not belong to one world or another, to one group or another, to one clan or another, they are able to walk between them, to serve as a conduit through which other groups or characters can interact with groups and characters they would never be able to interact with under normal circumstances. Power is granted to them by both sides beyond what any single structure would allow, because of that very fact.

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<sup>242</sup> *The Power of Film*, Suber, Howard. Season 1, Episode 2. MAX, 2024.

During the climax of “Ghost Rider” (2007), Nicolas Cage’s Johnny Blaze says this rather poignantly before dispatching the villainous Legion: “I’m the only one who can walk in both worlds.”

This is exactly what the Figure of Arthur – the Breton with a Roman name, the Roman with a Welsh title, the warrior and the unifier – represents: He somehow led a combined force of natives and Romans against the Saxons. The natives and the Romans would have hated each other because of the former’s subjugation at the hands of the latter, and yet, Arthur served as the intermediary to bring them together – it’s the very reason why the Figure of Arthur is so prominent in oral tradition, so exceptional.

Arthur’s status as an Outsider-Intermediary also allowed him to renegotiate the terms of power — who gets to wield it — because he is an orphan and a bastard, yet by the law of the land – the heart of the existing power structure – he passed the test of kingship in assaying the sword from the stone. That kingship is, as we’ve seen, not easily won. Those who had power at the time – the other nobles and contenders for High King, and those who benefitted from a lack of a unified executive – refused to bend the knee to Arthur, using the excuses that he was a boy, and that he was illegitimate. To those who see it as its own end, power is a right, not a privilege or a responsibility. They therefore do not respect it, and jealously guard against others who would deign to threaten their hold on it. To them, an Outsider-Intermediary like Arthur is an existential threat. Any admission that Arthur had legitimate claim on access to the existing power structure would open the door for members of heretofore powerless castes to get a seat at the table. As it turned out, they were right, and that table just happened to be Round.

Wonder Woman works as an Outsider-Intermediary because women — while not a “minority” — have been excluded from traditional power structures for millennia. Instead of

acting within those structures, she renegotiates the very nature of power by relying not on martial prowess or dominating might, but by locating the source of her power in love and understanding.

Batman is a fascinating study in this function of the Outsider-Intermediary, particularly because his innate duality gives us double the literary analysis fun. The character is an outsider because of what Bruce Wayne has materially — his wealth and the perceived power and influence that traditionally accompany it — *and* because of what he lacks— family and an intact sense of self. His “Matches Malone” — a street-tough persona used to blend in and gather reconnaissance from Gotham’s underworld — can walk among criminals because the character beneath knows true loss. The character’s Bruce Wayne persona — in the Classical, dramatic sense of the word (a mask an actor wears to play a character) — can walk among society’s elite because of their superficiality (they have no interest in asking penetrating questions, digging deeper, or thinking that he’s anything more than a rich playboy) and their obsession with the power they think their material wealth grants them. That perceived power, though, is illusory when compared to the power that Batman possesses, the power to actualize — to get results on the street — when he discards the Bruce Wayne persona.

Consider that, in both Christopher Nolan’s Dark Knight Trilogy and in the 2022 Matt Reeves film “The Batman,” starring Robert Pattinson, material wealth does nothing to assuage the economic pressures felt by the majority of Gothamites. After Dr. Thomas and Martha Wayne are murdered in “Batman Begins,” Gotham’s wealthy — we are told — were galvanized to save the city from an economic depression, yet the measures they took were merely superficial. Since then, Bruce’s childhood friend and love interest Rachel Dawes has become an assistant district attorney, whose office makes plea deals with low-level thugs to land bigger fish like crime lord Carmine Falcone. Such a deal with the man who killed the Waynes — Joe Chill — allowed him to



go free on parole, but instead of Bruce being able to take justice into his own hands with a concealed revolver, Chill is killed by one of Falcone's henchmen as he walks out of the courtroom. As she admonishes her old friend for not looking beyond his own pain, she explains: "This city is rotting. People talk about the depression as if it's history, and it's not. Things are worse than ever down here." The misappropriation and embezzlement of funds reserved for the Gotham Renewal Project championed by Thomas Wayne is at the center of Reeves's neo-noir crime thriller adaptation. The Zodiac-like Riddler in that film – an orphan with psychological issues who was abandoned when promised funding evaporated due to the malfeasance of government officials – repeatedly says that "Renewal is a lie."

Yes, Bruce Wayne's wealth could hypothetically be used to fund urban renewal programs, housing projects, medical research, technology and research grants, schools, shelters, food pantries, and job services. But the graft, corruption and rot in Gotham's traditional power structures is so pervasive that he is forced to shed his Bruce Wayne mask to reveal the Batman underneath in order to get any real results. In that way, the Outsider-Intermediary fuses with the Giant Slayer role quite nicely.

And yet, for all the power Batman does have — even Superman fears him — he still cannot bring his parents back, nor can he ever completely stamp out crime in Gotham on his own, just as Arthur can never achieve the Grail by himself; he must rely on his knights. So, too, does Batman have not only the Justice League, but his found family in Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), the various Robins, and his loyal butler/father figure Alfred – the only person alive who knows him completely.

Likewise, the only people who know Superman completely are those who have seen how his outsidership has strengthened him – his wife and adoptive parents. Superman, you see, faces

a different kind of outsidership entirely. As an immigrant, Superman is constantly engaged in negotiating a space within the nationality of the United States. He engages in a quintessentially American career—as a journalist, he is under the umbrella of the freedom of the press and freedom of speech – and engages in normalizing behaviors that accelerate his assimilation into American society, such as working on his father’s farm. Yet, while he affects a demure demeanor – the mild mannered reporter – he defies society’s expectations of what he can and should be by using the power granted by his heritage to make a difference.

In his early days, Cap stories were grassroots propaganda for the United States government, and – on the page – he was Uncle Sam’s greatest weapon against fascists. But this Steve Rogers – the gloved fist of the American military’s might, with a shield evoked that of the eagle on the Great Seal of the United States – was, at his core, still the scrawny kid from Brooklyn, the sensitive art student who just wanted to fight bullies. Yes, while he is depicted as knocking out Hitler with a right cross to the jaw in his first appearance – as Chris Evans’ Rogers says to disbelieving prisoners of war during a jailbreak in “Captain America: The First Avenger”: “I’ve knocked out Adolf Hitler over 200 times,” referring to the character’s USO performances to raise money for war bonds – but he is deeper, more human. A 90-pound weakling becoming an Olympic-level athlete, he absolutely was an expression of wish fulfillment, but not in a merely superficial way. He was the sickly orphan son of Irish immigrants, who held no power but for the desire in his heart to do good. He defied his fate to change his destiny.

Consider one of Le Morte d’Arthur’s final lines, in which Malory directly addresses the reader in reference to Arthur’s prophesied return: “I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life.” Arthur was not a god or even a demigod. He has no divine power over the cosmos or time. He was both man and king, who struggled with each side

of his identity, the burden of expectations and the limits of his mortality, ironically becoming immortal in the process. That essential *human* struggle is as much a part of a superhero's DNA as their masks, costumes, and superhuman abilities, be they Martian, Kryptonian, Amazonian, or just a scrawny kid from Brooklyn who couldn't stand bullies, no matter where they were from.

Like Arthur, Superman and Captain America are continually re-negotiated and re-interpreted. While they have each taken on new layers of meaning from the artists and writers who have crafted their stories over the decades, their core, main-line characterization (i.e. not the characterizations of any of their alternate-universe doppelgangers) remains defiant, always bending away from jingoism and dogmatism and back toward their role as the Outsider.

The film widely regarded as the biggest critical success in Marvel Studios' MCU – “Captain America: Winter Soldier” – sees Chris Evans' Steve Rogers discover that the fascist organization HYDRA has been operating secretly inside S.H.I.E.L.D. for decades. S.H.I.E.L.D. had grown out of the organization responsible for creating him – the Strategic Scientific Reserve – and was founded by, among others, his long-lost love Peggy Carter. It was part of her legacy. Yet, for all the good it had done, the subversive parasite within had been sowing the seeds of chaos and reaping war for decades. There were no half-measures. There was no saving SHIELD. It all had to come down, especially as it prepared to launch an intelligence apparatus that would lead to a global culling of undesirables under the cover of providing safety and security. At the start of the climactic battle, Rogers takes control of the public address system at the headquarters of that apparatus – the S.H.I.E.L.D. Triskelion:

**Rogers:** Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, this is Steve Rogers. You've heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it's time to tell the truth. S.H.I.E.L.D. is not what we thought it was. It's been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The S.T.R.I.K.E. and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost

have what they want. Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won't end there. If you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way. Unless we stop them. I know I'm asking a lot. But the price of freedom is high. It always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not.

This plot is anything but novel in Captain America's comic history; it in fact accesses an important facet of his character: That Arthurian pro-social mission and moral code. Cap has been on the wrong side of the law more often than he's been an instrument of either S.H.I.E.L.D. or the U.S. government, giving up the mantle of Captain America on several occasions (as I noted a few pages ago ... See: Nomad, The Captain). It also puts him into conflict with his longtime friend Tony Stark during Civil War. But, even though he disagrees vehemently with Stark, and with the idea of surrendering one group's freedom for another group's perceived security or comfort, he surrenders when he realizes that the people of New York are the ones suffering because of the constant super-powered clashes between his anti-Registration forces and Stark's pro-Registration heroes.<sup>243</sup>

In Captain America Vol. 4, #25, as Steve Rogers is being led to a New York County courthouse following his arrest for violating the Superhuman Registration Act, the narrative boxes on the comic book pages read like a eulogy. The newscaster intimates that Steve Rogers fought not for any particular America, but for the ideal of America, for the America that we believe in beyond political parties and policy decisions. He fought for a better world. The pages read:

Everyone knows the story of Steve Rogers, the skinny kid who grew up on the streets of New York City during the Depression, seeing the best and worst that America had to offer. How he saw the Nazis marching on Europe, and tried to join the armed services. How a general saw the courage under his 4-F frame, and enlisted him in another kind of service altogether. He was supposed to be the first of an army, an army of Super Soldiers, but it all went wrong. Project: Rebirth ended in blood and fire, and left one man to carry

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<sup>243</sup> Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #7 (Mar. 2007), Marvel Comics.

on in the place of all the others that might have been. One man to carry that burden. He made it look easy. Even though it never was. And he never stopped fighting for what he believed in. Or for what he believed his country should be.

While during World War II and the Cold War, Superman was blatantly nationalistic, that aspect of his character has since fallen away, and he has become more of a global hero. He still lives in the United States, but he is no longer an unflinchingly nationalistic eagle. Eric Francisco of website *Inverse* used the changing of Superman's motto as an opportunity to examine America's changing cultural landscape through Superman's first encounter with the violent vigilante group The Elite and their leader Manchester Black.<sup>244</sup>

In the story featured in Action Comics #775, which came out months before Sept. 11, 2001, Black taunts Superman: "Years of 'Truth, justice, and the American military-commercial-right-wing way,' and in the end, you're a spastic twitching to death for my amusement." After Superman turns the tables and prevails, Black spits back at him, saying he's "living in a bloody dream world." Superman responds: "Dreams save us. Dreams lift us up and transform us. And on my soul, I swear... until my dream of a world where dignity, honor, and justice becomes the reality we all share — I'll never stop fighting." Even more than 20 years ago, Superman wasn't so much dreaming of an America to fight for, but a world, a world in which people like his son would be accepted, to say nothing of being embraced as Kal El's rightful heir and successor.

In "Superman Returns," *Daily Planet* Editor-in-Chief, Perry White, asks his reporters to find out if the newly-returned hero still stands for "truth, justice ... all that stuff." In "Batman v. Superman," celebrants of the Mexican Day of the Dead clamor just to touch his cape after he saves them from a burning building. In the same film, he's also depicted dragging a stranded ship

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<sup>244</sup> Francisco, Eric. "Superman's New Motto Reveals a Painful Truth about the Man of Tomorrow." *Inverse*, 19 Oct. 2021, [www.inverse.com/entertainment/superman-motto-change-american-way](http://www.inverse.com/entertainment/superman-motto-change-american-way).

across Arctic ice by its anchor, echoing Alex Ross's iconic 1998 prestige graphic novel

Superman: Peace on Earth.<sup>245</sup>

Both Captain America and Superman have become global heroes, similar to how Arthur, in the last two centuries, has moved closer to his role as a *Restitutor Orbis*—like the one that Hawthorne gestured at—who is not just a hero for England or France or Europe, or even just the United States and ostensibly the rest of the Western world, but for the entire planet. Witness as evidence the music in the intro to this book, comic book covers in different languages, and the fact that stories of King Arthur have appeared in Latin, German, Welsh, French, English, Greek, Italian, Russian, and even Yiddish (*Widwilt* is a Yiddish reworking of the story of a character from Arthurian legend, Le Bel Inconnu). Superheroes don't belong to any one group; they belong to the world. They come by that through the Outsidership they inherited from Arthur, whose chief contribution to the creation of the superhero – the reason why he is the first example of the species – is the prosocial moral code, which is best summed up by Stanley Tucci's Dr. Erskine in the scene from "Captain America: The First Avenger," quoted earlier: "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." The Outsider and the Other know firsthand how power and strength can be abused. And, as Ben Parker famously tells his web-slinging nephew: With great power, must also come great responsibility.<sup>246</sup>

Superman refuses to use lethal force (of which he unquestionably has a surplus) and works within or alongside the law, to an extent. He is seen catching criminals and taking them to a beat cop in "Superman" (1978) and in the character study Superman For Tomorrow, he bears tremendous guilt for a mass "Vanishing" of people from the Earth because of his unwelcome

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<sup>245</sup> Dini, Paul and Ross, Alex. Superman: Peace on Earth. DC Comics. November 1998

<sup>246</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), and Steve Ditko (a). Amazing Fantasy #15 (Aug. 1962), Marvel Comics.

involvement in a Middle Eastern war, an involvement which caused the use of a Kryptonian weapon which blinked millions of people out of existence, including his wife Lois Lane.<sup>247</sup>

Superman is so dedicated to recusing himself from the day-to-day human business of the planet that he even refuses to vote, knowing that an endorsement from Superman would mean an endorsement of a certain party's ideology, not to mention certain victory for the party in question. Though he does his hero thing rescuing people and battling cosmic threats, he largely abides by his father's edict: It is forbidden for him to interfere in human history.<sup>248</sup> He elegantly (and silently) made that point by not intervening when Lex Luthor won the Presidency of the United States.<sup>249</sup>

Like Superman, Cap too has had his run-ins with politics. In one storyline, a third party nominates Captain America to run for President, but he declines the offer, preferring instead to fight for his idyllic America, not any one party's version of it.<sup>250</sup> Cap's moral code at times has clashed with other heroes in the Marvel Universe, no more so than with the lethal Punisher, a conflict which came to a head during the Civil War event which pitted Cap and his Secret Avengers against Iron Man and the forces of law and order.

In Civil War #6, when Frank Castle – the skull-clad vigilante anti-hero whose tragic loss of his family at the hands of a mob hit squad turned him into the Punisher – kills two super villains who wish to join the ranks of the heroes rebelling against the Superhuman Registration Act, Captain America assaults him and asks why he doesn't fight back. "Fight, you coward!" Rogers yells with his fist raised above a prone Castle, who replies groggily, "Not against you." As deranged and as brutal as Frank Castle's methods might be, and as different as his ideas of

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<sup>247</sup> Brian Azzarello (w), Jim Lee (p), and Scott Williams (i). "Superman For Tomorrow." Superman #204-215 (2005), DC Comics.

<sup>248</sup> Marlon Brando's Jor El delivers this edict twice in "Superman" (1978) – first on his son's cosmic journey to Earth, and then as an echoing memory as Superman is about to turn back time to save Lois Lane.

<sup>249</sup> Jeph Loeb (w). "President Lex." Superman: Lex 2000 #1 (Jan. 2001), DC Comics.

<sup>250</sup> Roger Stern (w), John Byrne (w, p), and Joe Rubinstein (i). *Captain America* Vol. 1 #250 (Oct. 1980), Marvel Comics.

justice are from the rest of the superhero community, he still recognizes the ideals that Steve Rogers represents every time he puts on the flag. Patriot – the grandson of Isaiah Bradley – says, “I wonder why he wouldn’t hit Cap,” to which Spider-Man responds, “Are you kidding me? Cap’s probably the reason he went to Vietnam.”<sup>251</sup>

In Dr. Bender and Lourie’s study of childhood trauma, she noted that after Tessie, 12, had witnessed her father – a convicted murderer – kill himself, she insisted on calling herself Shiera, after a comic book girl who is always rescued at the last minute by the Flash. Another child, 11-year-old Kenneth, had been raped. He was frantic unless medicated or “wearing a Superman cape.” He felt safe in it—he could fly away if he wanted to—and, Bender noted, “he felt that the cape protected him from an assault.”<sup>252</sup>

When Wonder Woman – the heroine Dr. Bender defended before Congress – debuted in 1941, she was a revelation: a woman who wasn’t the damsel in distress, but instead could go toe-to-toe with the men. Despite her vast strength, though, her arsenal was not offensive: Her enchanted bracelets deflected bullets, and her Lasso of Truth bound, but did not maim or kill. Her entire philosophy centers around using love and understanding – rather than a philosophy of “might makes right” – to solve the world’s ills. In Wonder Woman Vol. 3 #25 (December, 2008), she encapsulates her entire ethos in one quote: “We have a saying, my people. Don’t kill if you can wound, don’t wound if you can subdue, don’t subdue if you can pacify, and don’t raise your hand at all until you’ve first extended it.”

Like the figure of Arthur, our superheroes fight for a world not only where we live up to our ideals, but where we prove worthy of them

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<sup>251</sup> Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #6, (Jan. 2007), Marvel Comics.

<sup>252</sup> 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/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/origin-story-wonder-woman-180952710/).



## **Part 5: More than a Mask**

“Give a man a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

—*Oscar Wilde*

## ***Chapter 18: The Spark is Now a Flame***

### **A New Mythology Arises as Arthurian Superheroes Multiply**

The spark is now a flame  
The fire that you breathed inside of me  
Now there is no doubt  
There will be some knocking down and dragging out  
You build me up and I'm forever changed  
If I should fall, then I'll just call your name, your name

#### **—Family Force 5, *Superhero***

Following in the steps of Superman, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel, legions of superheroes emerged during the turbulent 1960s. That decade brought a heroic renaissance as Marvel Comics and DC Comics introduced characters who found new ways to express the same traits, fulfill the same roles – Outsider, Boy King, Warrior King, Giant-Slayer – and enact the broad, pro-social mission and moral code of King Arthur.

#### **Whosoever Holds This Hammer, If He Be Worthy ...**

In June of 1962, the Norse thunder god Thor made his triumphant return to the popular imagination, still swinging his trusty hammer Mjolnir in the pages of Journey Into Mystery #38. Introduced as “The Most Exciting Superhero of All Time!”, the son of Odin underwent a few key alterations to his lore for his comic debut.

The comic book Mjolnir – like Excalibur – is a tester of worthiness and purity of heart. Inscribed on its head are the words: “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.” Only the worthy can lift it, and among the worthy have been Captain

America<sup>253</sup>, Wonder Woman<sup>254</sup>, and Superman.<sup>255</sup> Also like Excalibur or the Sword in the Stone, it is a mark of office, of sorts. It is Thor's symbol, a mark of his history and his power, just as Captain America's shield comes to represent the ideals and the dream of a better America.

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

But what about the four roles that the other heroes engage in? Marvel's Thor participates most discernibly in three of them. In Marvel continuity, the thunder god is sent away from the realm of the gods by his father Odin as punishment for his pride and vanity (in the 2011 Marvel film, he is banished for breaking a centuries-long – yet tenuous – peace with the Frost Giants in his youthful exuberance for battle). Sent to Earth as a crippled doctor, Donald Blake, Thor is to learn humility and compassion, things that belong more in the moral code of Camelot than among the golden towers of Asgard. As a disabled human, he is far from the strapping, muscle-bound deity that he used to be. As an incomplete person, without full use of his legs, he is a societal outsider. He must carry the stigma of a physician who cannot heal himself.

Eventually, when Blake discovers that when he taps his cane on the ground he reverts to his Asgardian self, he finds himself dressed in full battle regalia, with a winged Norse helmet, tough leather boots, an armored tunic, and of course, Mjolnir, transformed from its earthly form

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<sup>253</sup> Tom DeFalco (w), Ron Frenz (a), and Brett Breeding (i). "The Hero and the Hammer." Thor Vol. 1 #390 (Apr. 1988), Marvel Comics.

<sup>254</sup> Ron Marz (w), Peter David (w), Dan Jurgens (p), and Claudio Castellini (p). "The Showdown of the Century." Marvel vs. DC Vol. 1 #2-3 (Mar.-Apr. 1996), Amalgam Comics.

<sup>255</sup> Kurt Busiek (w), George Perez (a), and Tom Smith (colorist). Avengers/JLA #4 (Apr. 2004), DC Comics.

as a simple walking cane. He transforms into the Warrior that Arthur, Alexander, David, Captain America, and Superman all are. He is the son of Odin – the “Allfather” and king of the Norse gods, much like Hercules is the son of the chief Greek deity, Zeus. Unlike Hercules, though, Thor is a true prince, and takes the throne of Asgard as king after Odin perishes.<sup>256</sup> As a Giant-Slayer, Thor battles many mythical giants, including his father’s old nemeses the Frost Giants, the Asgardian monster Mangog,<sup>257</sup> and the God-Eater.<sup>258</sup>

Propp’s spheres of action are quite prominent in Thor’s story, particularly the Anti-Hero/Usurper, the Dispatcher, and the Donor. Like King Arthur, Thor’s greatest foe is a family member: Loki, the god of mischief and adopted son of Odin, constantly torments his older brother, who Loki views as the favorite. On more than one occasion, Loki tries to take Thor’s place at Odin’s side, if he’s not angling to take the throne of Asgard itself.<sup>259</sup>

Thor’s Dispatcher is his father, Odin, who sends Thor to Midgard (Earth) to learn humility, and as a result, he became one of that realm’s greatest defenders. The Donor(s) in Thor’s story are the dwarf smiths who forge his hammer and other equipment.

## **The Fastest Man Alive**

The first Flash, Jay Garrick, debuted in January of 1940, battling elemental and monstrous foes that would seem to be at home in the world of King Arthur, including a giant spider-like creature with the head of a man.<sup>260</sup> The Flash’s chevron, in each of his iterations, is a bolt of lightning. In an inversion of Excalibur as ‘hardened-lightning,’ the Flash eventually

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<sup>256</sup> Dan Jurgens (w), Stuart Immonen (p), and Joe Bennet (p). “Death of Odin.” *Thor* Vol. 2 #39-44 (Sept. 2001-Feb. 2002), Marvel Comics.

<sup>257</sup> Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a). *Thor* Vol. 1 #154 (Jul. 1968), Marvel Comics.

<sup>258</sup> Alan Zelenetz (w) and Bob Hall (a). “Dawn of the Gods!” *Thor* Annual #10 (1982), Marvel Comics.

<sup>259</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), and Bill Everett (i). “The Fall of Asgard!” *Thor* Vol. 1 #175 (Apr. 1970), Marvel Comics.

<sup>260</sup> Gardner Fox (w) and Sheldon Moldoff (p). *Flash Comics* #24 (Dec. 1941), All-American Publications.

becomes anything but hardened—he becomes speed and light itself in the future world of the series Kingdom Come.<sup>261</sup>

The Flash fulfills the Warrior role in his second incarnation—that of police officer Barry Allen, who takes the mantle after being doused with crime lab chemicals whose containers were shattered by a bolt of lightning.<sup>262</sup> Like the young Arthur, Allen is a sideline player in the world of battle. He is a slow-footed crime lab officer, who idolized the previous Flash, Jay Garrick, a college football star.

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

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

The first of these, the Reverse Flash, appeared in Flash Vol. 1 #139 (1963), and hailed from the 25th century. He was obsessed with the 20th century's second Flash, Barry Allen, and

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<sup>261</sup> Mark Waid (w), Alex Ross (a). "Strange Visitor." Kingdom Come #1 (May 1996), DC Comics. pp. 41.

<sup>262</sup> Phil Jimenez. "The Flash." The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

so tried to duplicate his powers, thereby fulfilling the “pursuit” requirement of the Villain sphere of action. He attempts to win the heart of Allen’s wife, Iris, and then in his rage, apparently murdered her (though she survived somehow as a denizen of the 30th century).<sup>263</sup>

Zoom was once Hunter Solomon, a close friend of Wally West, the third Flash. A series of tragedies caused him to don the same reverse-costume as Reverse Flash, and he came to terrorize West and his family. His attack on West’s wife, Linda Park, caused her to miscarry the twins that she was carrying. Because of his own tragic history, Solomon comes to worship tragedy as a catalyzing agent, which would make the Flash a better hero. His delusions were partially correct, though misguided. After seeing how his deranged doppelganger hurt his family, West wished that the world could forget his secret identity, a wish granted by the omnipotent hero Spectre.<sup>264</sup>

Another Propp sphere present in the Flash mythos is the Donor. Though in this case, the donor is not human, it is still characterized by mystical and transcendental properties. The Flash’s ability to move at lightning quick speeds was not granted by simple electro-chemical reactions. Instead, it is revealed that the Speedforce, an ancient, abstract, omnipresent entity which powers all super-speedsters. That is the Donor which gave all three Flash’s their powers.<sup>265</sup>

### **In Brightest Day, In Blackest Night ...**

The DC hero who eventually becomes the Spectre which grants Wally West’s wish is none other than one of the DC Universe’s emerald-clad vassals, the former Green Lantern, Hal Jordan. The original Green Lantern, Alan Scott, debuted in All-American Comics #16 (July 1940), and had as his base Gotham City, the nighttime aerie of the shadowy Batman. His green

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<sup>263</sup> Daniel Wallace. “Reverse Flash.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

<sup>264</sup> Daniel Wallace. “Zoom.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

<sup>265</sup> Phil Jimenez. “The Flash.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

power ring had mystical origins and was powerless against materials made of wood—very earthly concepts not too far removed from the magical realm of Arthur and Merlin. In time, the title fell out of favor and was canceled. But when DC began to streamline and update some of its old titles in the 1950s, Green Lantern made his return in the form of a Warrior, Hal Jordan.

A hot-shot test pilot, Jordan came across a downed alien craft during one of his flights, discovering a dying purple-skinned alien dressed in a black and green suit. In an echo of the worthiness tests presented by Excalibur, Captain America's shield, and Thor's hammer, this alien – Abin Sur – decrees that Jordan is pure of heart, and that he must carry on the legacy of the Green Lantern Corps, thereby making him an intergalactic Warrior. As the Proppian Donor Sur expires, he hands Jordan a glowing green ring shaped like a miner's lantern, and Jordan immediately transforms into the newest—and most popular—incarnation of the hero.<sup>266</sup>

As part of the oath taken to become a Green Lantern, Jordan must recite an oath that owes its existence to the Text of Arthuriana:

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

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

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<sup>266</sup> John Broome (w), Gil Kane (p), and Joe Giella (i). "Menace of the Runaway Missile." Showcase Comics #22 (Oct. 1959), DC Comics.

battery, located on the world of Oa. These are the Guardians of the Universe, and the creators of the intergalactic Green Lantern Corps.<sup>267</sup>

Somewhat a rarity among some of the more ancillary heroes, Jordan's Green Lantern fulfills the difficult Princess and Her Father sphere as well. His love interest, Carol Ferris, is the heiress to the Ferris Aircraft company, which Jordan works for, and therefore quite the Princess. She prefers Jordan's alter ego to him, though like Lois Lane, this allows her to fulfill the action of hero identification. Instead of identifying a false hero or usurper, she identifies the true hero within Jordan, though she fails to make the connection.

Speaking of the False Hero, there is no greater a villain for a Green Lantern than one who has forsaken his vow and gone rogue, and in Jordan's case, it is his former best friend, Sinestro (seriously, if this wasn't comic book fare, he should have seen that one coming. Just look at that name!). Sinestro breaks from the Corps and forms a corps of his own—the aptly named Sinestro Corps. His yellow-powered Lanterns fight the Green Lanterns, with Jordan at the head. Jordan must eventually defeat his former friend and mentor, and bring him to justice.<sup>268</sup>

### **“We’re Ironmongers, Tony”**

Then there is the so-called Armored Avenger, Iron Man, who first appeared in Tales of Suspense #39, in March of 1963. Mortally wounded in the jungles of Vietnam, billionaire weapons manufacturer Tony Stark is forced to engineer a weapon for his Viet Cong captors, but instead constructs a lifesaving pacemaker for himself and integrates it into a suit of armor, which allows him to escape. Stark is a billionaire capitalist, wealthy beyond imagination, and is a modern “king” in America, if you will.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Phil Jimenez. “Green Lantern Corps.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

<sup>268</sup> Phil Jimenez. “Sinestro.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

<sup>269</sup> In the 2008 film, *Iron Man*, Jeff Bridges' Obadiah Stane refers to Stark as a “prince” and is said to lust after Stark's “throne” at the head of Stark Industries.



One of Stark's recurring villains is a nod to some of the more common villains of medieval romance (and one of the heroic figures of Eastern religion, which is poetic given Iron Man's Vietnam-era origins)—the fire breathing dragon. Fin Fang Foom—a fire-breathing dragon-like alien—is not too far of a leap from the knights slaying dragons to save the damsel in distress.

While Stark's state-of-the art armor has advanced in complexity and design over the years, the suit of armor has consistently maintained some of the forms of medieval plate armor that would be placed on Arthur's character by later redactors of Arthurian mythology. Stark's armor consistently employs a chest and back plate assembly similar to medieval knight's plate armor, armored boots and gauntlets, an under-layer similar in function to chainmail (but far more advanced), circular guard plates at the hip joints (again, similar to various medieval suits of armor), and in 1998, he even wore armor explicitly styled after medieval suits of armor.<sup>270</sup> Stark is, in very real terms, a modern day knight in shining armor. A further investigation of Stark's past reveals that this fascination with armor has a familiar source. While relating a brief biography of Stark in 2009's "Iron Man: Requiem" comic, writer Michael Hoskin states that "after reading Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, Tony was entranced by its tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table."<sup>271</sup> Like the Arthur of the Auchinleck, Stark fights modern-day "saracens" during the War on Terror, after having originally battled Communists from Vietnam and the villainous spurned Chinese noble, the Mandarin.

Unlike Captain America, Stark is hardly a soldier. He is more akin to the arms manufacturer who touches off a South American war in Action Comics #1, a man that Superman brings to justice. In more modern tellings, though, Tony Stark has pivoted away from his role as

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<sup>270</sup> Kurt Busiek (w), George Perez (w), and Al Vey (i). "Once an Avenger..." Avengers Vol. 3 #2 (Mar. 1998), Marvel Comics.

<sup>271</sup> Michael Hoskin. "Iron Man: Requiem" (Dec., 2009). Marvel Comics.

a merchant of death. In the movie that kicked off the MCU – “Iron Man” (2008) – Robert Downey Jr.’s Tony Stark vows to halt all weapons manufacturing after he is attacked and held for ransom in Afghanistan by a terrorist organization known as the Ten Rings. The War on Terror update to Stark’s origin allows him to sidestep the racial undertones that colored his early comic adventures and instead pit him against the very military-industrial complex which made his family wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. Obadiah Stane – Tony’s surrogate father and trusted confidante – tries to prevail upon his protege to rescind his pledge:

**Stane:** Tony, we're a weapons manufacturer. Tony.

**Stark:** Obie, I just— I don't want a body count to be our only legacy.

**Stane:** That's— that's what we do. We're ironmongers. We make weapons.

Stane – who we learn is behind Tony’s abduction and attempted assassination – eventually dons his own armor, reverse-engineered from the Mark I armor that Stark builds in an Afghan cave to escape captivity. Stane’s *nome de guerre*? Iron Monger.

So how is a story about a billionaire boy genius dressed in bleeding-edge battle armor armed with next-gen artificial intelligence akin to the concept of a folktale? Let’s look at how Propp’s spheres of action apply. First, there is of course the Villain who pursues the hero: Obadiah Stane, a business rival of Stark’s, lusts after Stark’s money and his company, even going so far as to break him down psychologically, causing him to relapse into alcoholism.<sup>272</sup> What about the donor? While the billionaire genius may not seem wanting for much, when his heart is pierced by shrapnel during an explosion – a condition that requires him to build his first life-sustaining suit of armor – Nobel Prize-winning physicist Ho Yinsen saves his life and helps him construct the Mark I armor to escape North Vietnamese warlord Wong-Chu.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Peter Sanderson. “Stane, Obadiah.” [The Marvel Encyclopedia](#), 2006.

<sup>273</sup> Andrew Darling. “Iron Man.” [The Marvel Encyclopedia](#), 2006.

Iron Man's stories are chock full of Proppian spheres of action, all intertwined. While traditionally, Iron Man occupies the sphere of the Hero, when he first lapses into alcoholism in the "Demon in a Bottle" storyline (Iron Man #128, 1978), his trusted ally – Marine pilot Jim Rhodes – takes over the mantle of Iron Man while Stark recuperates. The Iron Man suit, however, was calibrated for Tony Stark's brainwaves, and after a time, Rhodes was driven insane by the dissonance, and it took a rehabilitated Stark donning one of his old suits of armor to save his friend. As thanks for taking on the Iron Man duties while he was away, Stark gave Rhodes, the former Usurper, his own suit of armor specially tailored for Rhodes' brainwaves. Dubbed War Machine for the new armor's loadout of offensive ordinance, Rhodes became a hero in his own right. In that way, Stark himself fulfills the role of Donor that Ho Yinsen once fulfilled for him.

## **SHAZAM!**

DC's most prominent Donor and Magical Helper is the white-bearded wizard who presides over the Rock of Eternity, first appearing in Whiz Comics #2 in February, 1940. The wizard gives young paper boy Billy Batson a gift equal to if not greater than that given by Jor El to his son by virtue of Kryptonian DNA—the power to become the Earth's mightiest mortal, Shazam. Billy Batson is a Boy King if ever there was one. He remains somewhat frozen in time as a young boy, then a teenager, and subsequently a young man throughout his comic history, but by shouting one word, he becomes a superhero that can go toe-to-toe with Superman's physical gifts. The wizard also functions as the Shazam story's Dispatcher. The wizard had been the champion of mankind for millennia, and as he was aging, he needed a replacement. His charge to the young orphan is to be that champion. He implores Batson to uphold the cause of good and to

battle the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, thereby giving Shazam his mission.<sup>274</sup> Though Shazam appears as a man in his mid-thirties, the charm of the character comes from the boy inside. It is Billy Batson's idealism, moral code, and boundless hope and optimism that contrast with Batman's grim cynicism and the jaded adult worldviews that other superheroes come to possess by virtue of their lived experience.

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

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

Like Arthur – who similarly made the leap from pagan tradition to Christian hero – Shazam is a warrior. The letters that make up the name Shazam – which Batson must yell to become the Big Red Cheese – are an acronym for the powers that he possesses, and the earlier heroic figures from which they come.

Though he has many foes, his most constant—and the one most tied into the orphaned Batson's traumatic past—is Black Adam, a fallen former wielder of the wizard's great gift. An ancient Egyptian prince, the erstwhile Teth-Adam received his powers from a mystical scarab imbued with the wizard's magic. Though the acronym's letters stood for other figures (Egyptian gods), the powers were the same. After Teth-Adam became corrupted, and turned to evil, the wizard stripped him of his powers and entombed the amulet with Pharaoh Ramses II, until 20th-century archaeologists C.C. and Marilyn Batson—Billy's parents—uncovered it. They were then murdered by Teth-Adam reincarnate, Theo Adam. Theo became Black Adam, and donned a costume that was a dark mirror of the one worn by Shazam.

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<sup>274</sup> Scott Beatty. “Captain Marvel.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

Like Mordred and many of the Villain/Usurpers, Black Adam is, unsurprisingly, dressed in black.<sup>275</sup> Black Adam's outfit does not feature the cape that hangs around Marvel's neck, a richly-adorned heroic cape. Instead, Adam's costume includes cold metal armbands, and his close-cropped hair forms a widow's peak, enhancing his pointed-ear devilish appearance.<sup>276</sup>

### **Whatever a Spider Can**

Another hero haunted constantly by a dark mirror Usurper/Villain is Marvel's teenage web-slinger, Spider-Man, who bears perhaps the most obvious moral code in the vein of King Arthur's. The line most often associated with Webhead, as he is affectionately called by other heroes, is one penned by Stan Lee, who still maintains he has no clue where it came from: "With great power must also come great responsibility."<sup>277</sup> The first character to say this to Parker is his doomed caretaker, Uncle Ben, who inadvertently gives Spider-Man his mission and his task, thereby fulfilling the role of Dispatcher.<sup>278</sup>

Peter Parker was an ordinary high school student before he had his fateful encounter with an irradiated spider. Ordinary insofar as he is awkward, alienated, and uncoordinated. In the United States, a country founded without the titles of nobility the Founding Fathers refused to inherit from England, there can be no true "kings." Instead, the everyman is made into a king. Every man (at least rhetorically) has a vote, a say in the government. Any person (as long as you're a white male from a wealthy family, but I digress), ostensibly, can grow up to be President of the United States. What better an Everyman can there be than one who had a near-universally awkward high school experience. Peter Parker is like the creators of Superman—most decidedly

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<sup>275</sup> Julek Heller's painting "Mordred" (1990); H.J. Ford's illustration, "Sir Mordred" (1902).

<sup>276</sup> Robert Greenberger. "Black Adam." *The DC Comics Encyclopedia*, 2004.

<sup>277</sup> *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*. DVD. Dir. Steve Kroopnick. Perf. Peta Wilson, Denny O'Neil, Jim Steranko, Michael Chabon, Will Eisner, Mike Richardson, Kevin Smith, Frank Miller, Bradford Wright, Paul Levitz, Stan Lee, Joe Quesada, Avi Arad, and Neil Gaiman. The History Channel, 2003. 41:37.

<sup>278</sup> Stan Lee (w), Jack Kirby (a), and Steve Ditko (a). *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (Aug. 1962), Marvel Comics.

not the popular kid. But at 15 years old—close to the ages of King Arthur (12-17), King David (12), and Alexander the Great (20) when they rose to prominence—Parker got lucky. He was the victim of the best bug bite in the history of bug bites.<sup>279</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>279</sup> Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). "Captain America Goes Underground." *Civil War* #2, p. 21 (Jun. 2006), Marvel Comics.

back. Ignorant of the true nature of this “new suit,” Spider-Man battles on, finding his abilities and emotions enhanced. Over the next few months, the suit slowly tries to take over Parker, taking him on nocturnal adventures which Parker is unaware of in the morning, though he realizes that he is suffering from exhaustion. When it is revealed that the suit has a mind of its own, Parker uses sonic waves from church bells to drive the creature from his body.<sup>280</sup>

In the meantime, Parker’s dark mirror (the False Hero), Eddie Brock, begins work as a reporter for the *Daily Bugle*. Brock is very much like Parker in many ways, though more ambitious. He uncovers the “true” identity of a renowned serial killer in an investigative piece for the *Bugle*, becoming Jameson’s favored employee in the process. During one of Spider-Man’s exploits, Parker reveals that the true killer was not brought to justice, and that Brock’s story was a fabrication. Brock is shunned by the journalism community and loses his job. As if that wasn’t enough, he is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Furious at Spider-Man, blaming the hero for his misfortunes, Brock is in the same church on the same night that Parker uses the bells to free himself from the black suit. The black goo drips down the bell tower and onto Brock, healing his cancer and giving him knowledge of Spider-Man’s true identity. Learning that Spider-Man and Peter Parker are one in the same, Brock becomes the ferocious Venom, garbed in the same black suit as Spider-Man had once been, but far more muscular and with a grotesque, twisted grin full of razor-sharp teeth and a slimy serpentine tongue.<sup>281</sup>

Venom has become one of the most popular villains/Usurpers/Anti-heroes in all of comics. Visually impressive and psychologically involved directly with the hero, the image of Venom is one that begs a question of other superheroes: what would have happened if everything

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<sup>280</sup> “Venom.” Marvel Directory. MarvelDirectory.com. 3 May 2008 <<http://www.marveldirectory.com/individuals/v/venom.htm>>.

<sup>281</sup> Peter Sanderson. “Venom.” The Marvel Encyclopedia. 2006.

had gone wrong? He is a dark commentary on the nature of do-gooder superheroes, and, like Black Adam, an inheritor of the legacy of Mordred.

Like Arthur, Mordred is begotten through magic and deception, but is still the son of the king. The question that he asks is why should he be considered less of an heir than his father? Should not the individuals who have been punished and ostracized for no fault of their own be allowed the same chance to determine their own fate and change their stars? Of course, Mordred's inquiry is made in bad faith – he merely hopes to undercut Arthur's support and legitimacy by making him out to be a hypocrite. He seeks vengeance and power, much like Venom. While Spider-Man and King Arthur have dedicated themselves to selfless pro-social missions and to acts of heroism despite the difficulties they may involve, both Mordred and Venom are driven by revenge, anger, hate, resentment, and – ultimately – fear: fear of anonymity, fear of loss, fear of powerlessness, and fear of rejection.

### **To Me, My X-Men!**

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

Being ostracized as they are, they share a kinship with Parker in the sense that they are, despite remarkable abilities, representative of the Everyman in the United States. In a country of immigrants and minorities, the X-Men, whose mutant powers manifest at puberty (fulfilling the Boy King role) represent what it's like to categorically not belong. Not only are Marvel's mutants feared as uncontrollable children with potentially deadly abilities, but as they become



adults, they must constantly negotiate their mission to help human beings with the fact that while many may need help, they refuse to accept it from a 'dirty mutant.' Their attempts to help people are often viewed by onlookers as attempts to hurt or murder, making their jobs even more difficult.<sup>282</sup>

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

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

Their Magical Helper is the machine Cerebro, which enhances the powers of psychically-gifted mutants and allows the wearer to find any mutant anywhere on the planet if they concentrate hard enough.<sup>283</sup>

The Princess and Her Father function is fulfilled by the psychic Jean Grey for her husband and X-Men field general, Scott Summers (Cyclops). When Summers is fused with the spirit of Apocalypse, it is Jean who tracks down the memory-wiped X-Man and, with the help of their son Nathan (Cable), removes the presence of Apocalypse from him, thereby identifying the true hero within.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. Marvels 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York: Marvel Publishing, 2004.

<sup>283</sup> Peter Sanderson. "X-Men." Marvel Encyclopedia. 2006.

<sup>284</sup> Alan Davis, Terry Kavanagh, et al. (w), Roger Cruz, Rob Liefeld, et al. (p). "The Twelve." Uncanny X-Men Vol. 1 #377 (Jan.-Feb. 2000), Marvel Comics.

The false hero/anti-hero is none other than Magneto, Prof. Xavier's polar opposite, who believes not in the unification of mankind and mutantkind, but rather a war of Darwinian survival. At times, he seems rehabilitated and even joins the X-Men or takes over for his old friend Xavier, only to revert to his old ways.<sup>285</sup>

Even though mutation was originally simply a plot device to enable multiple different types of superpowers without having to give multiple separate detailed explanations, they became an example not only of found family, but of what disparate people can achieve when they combine their strengths and weaknesses.

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<sup>285</sup> Tom Bevoort. "Magneto." Marvel Encyclopedia. 2006.

## ***Chapter 19: It's Just Too Heavy for Superman to Lift***

### **How Super Teams Inherit the Role of the Knights of the Round Table**

He hasn't dropped them  
Forgotten or anything  
It's just too heavy for Superman to lift

#### **– The Flaming Lips, *Waitin' For a Superman***

In the very first teaser trailer for the seminal superhero film, “The Avengers” (2012), Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury provides the voiceover:

*“And there came a day, a day unlike any other, when Earth’s Mightiest Heroes found themselves united against a common threat, to fight the foes no single superhero could withstand. On that day, the Avengers were born.”*

Those words and variations on them had graced the inside covers of Avengers comic books for more than three decades. There didn’t need to be any accompanying visual, other than the distinctive Avengers ‘A,’ for fans to exalt. And they weren’t disappointed. The film brought together the Marvel trinity – Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor – alongside super-spies/redeemed assassins Hawkeye and Black Widow, as well as the Incredible Hulk, to face an army of alien warriors led by Loki, the God of Mischief, and commanded by the Mad Titan, Thanos. The film capped off what became Phase 1 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the first in three acts of what came to be called the Infinity Saga. It was a grand experiment – a shared cinematic universe had never been cohesively and successfully created across multiple genres with multiple films featuring multiple protagonists – and it succeeded. It fulfilled its promise: It was a film unlike any other.

At the start of the third act, after Loki – Thor’s adopted brother – has unleashed an uncontrollable Hulk aboard the SHIELD helicarrier, successfully crippled the ship with an

incursion of brainwashed operatives (Hawkeye among them), killed point-of-view character Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg), and escapes with the Cosmic Cube in hand. Thor is dropped from the sky in a cage, and Hawkeye – who led the strike team to steal the Cube for the God of Mischief – is recovering from having had his senses knocked back into him by fellow super-spy Natasha Romanov (Scarlet Johansson’s Black Widow). Standing on the bridge of his limping sky fortress with Steve Rogers and Tony Stark, Nick Fury addresses the breach of trust that shattered the team just as Loki set his plan into motion.

**Fury:** There was an idea, Stark knows this, called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could.

Compare these two monologues by Fury to the Auchinleck’s description of the Knights of the Round Table, in lines 2198-2206 (which I’ve translated from Middle English):

Of knights that men know best  
 In this world throughout  
 That table should sit about,  
 At that table none might sit  
 But they who were noble and brave  
 Strong and handy, hardy and wise  
 Certain and true without deceit  
 Here, none otherwise should fail  
 Nor flee out of battle

The Avengers, the Justice League, the Justice Society, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men – these modern super teams are far from a new phenomenon. As far back as the 12th century, King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table exhibited staggering superhuman abilities. In *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a catalog of Arthur’s court attests to some knights displaying superior “leaping, eating, and hearing” ability, and others include a “prodigious runner (and) a remarkable seer.”<sup>286</sup> Sound familiar?

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<sup>286</sup> Patrick K. Ford. “Culhwch and Olwen.” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

Superman is accompanied in the Justice League of America by a prodigious runner: the Flash. One of Captain America's familiars among the Avengers is an android dubbed the Vision. Wolverine, another Avenger, is possessed of heightened senses, including hearing and smell. These assemblages—the Avengers and the Justice League—bear remarkable resemblance to some of the earliest figurations of Arthur's court and to the Nine Worthies.<sup>287</sup>

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

Most modern super-teams – notably DC's Justice League of America and Marvel's Avengers – consistently have the most Arthurian characters at the lead. That being the case, it is no accident that many of the meetings of these teams occur – you guessed it – at a round table in the meeting chambers of their respective headquarters.<sup>288</sup> The Avengers have a round table in their mansion,<sup>289</sup> their tower,<sup>290</sup> and even in the hollowed out corpse of a Celestial called

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<sup>287</sup> Patrick K. Ford. "Culhwch and Olwen." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>288</sup> Mark Waid (w), Alex Ross (a). "Truth and Justice." *Kingdom Come* #2 (Jun. 1996), DC Comics.; Grant Morrison (w). *Justice League of America* #16 (Apr. 2005), DC Comics.; "Avengers mansion." *Marvel Directory*. MarvelDirectory.com. 3 May 2008 <<http://www.marveldirectory.com/miscellaneous/avengermansion.htm>>.

<sup>289</sup> The Avengers gather around a round meeting table with a large 'A' on it at Avengers Mansion in *The Avengers* #72 (January, 1970).

<sup>290</sup> The Avengers also gather around the same round meeting table in *The Avengers* Vol. 1 #173 (July, 1978).

<sup>291</sup> In *The Avengers* #211 in September 1981, the titular team gathers around a similar round table, this one emblazoned with their trademark stylized 'A' monogram.

Avengers Mountain.<sup>292</sup> The Justice League has been depicted as meeting around a round table on the page since their inception, and in both animated and live-action television shows.<sup>293</sup>

Led by Captain America, the Avengers' constantly-changing ranks have included such pagan analogues as Thor (a member of the original Avengers), a morally ambiguous hero named Ares, and the son of Zeus himself, Hercules. Thor and the Hulk – large, powerful heroes who rely on sheer force – typify the hero class known as “the hammer” or “the brick.” These heroes include the Thing in the Fantastic Four, Arthur's Sir Kay, and X-Force's Strong Guy. They share that imagery with Judah Maccabee, whose name in English translates to “hammer.” Other members have included Iron Man (in all his knightly glory), Hawkeye the archer, the android Vision, the magical mutant Scarlet Witch, and her brother Quicksilver, who's blinding speed evokes Mercury and Hermes.

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

As you can see, super teams are generally made up of a collection of characters that typically fall into one of seven archetypes, which can at times overlap. These archetypes can also be found in both the Nine Worthies and the Knights of the Round Table.

**The Face** is the leader, spokesman, and heart of the team, and usually doubles as one of the other archetypes. Examples include Captain America, Superman, King Arthur, Cyclops of the X-Men, and Hawkman of the Justice Society. Peter Quill – Star Lord of the Guardians of the Galaxy – is the son of a powerful alien king in the comics, and of the godlike Celestial Ego (a

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<sup>292</sup> The Avengers Vol. 8 #50 (Dec. 2021) depicts a round table inside the top of the Celestial's staff, which serves as the Avengers' War Room.

<sup>293</sup> “Crisis on Infinite Earths: Part Five.” *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, created by Greg Berlanti, season 5, episode 0, Warner Bros., 2020.

living planet whom he eventually defeats) in the Marvel films, so he certainly has the pedigree of a Superman or an Arthur. Yet, because of his mixed parentage and his youth spent traipsing around the galaxy, he is a perpetual outsider no matter where he lays his head.

**The Mage** is a master of a specific magical or technical field of expertise. There is a subset of this role which we will call The Healer, who attends to the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of their teammates. Examples include Rocket Raccoon of the Guardians of the Galaxy (a weapons and technology savant who happens to be a talking raccoon), the Scarlet Witch, Dr. Strange (a literal surgeon, along with being the Sorcerer Supreme), Doc Samson (a psychiatrist), Dr. Fate, Brother Voodoo, the Spectre, Merlin, and Sir Gawain, whose knowledge of herbs make him an excellent healer.<sup>294</sup>

**The Ranged Fighter** is a strategic and calculating character who typically utilizes guns, arrows, blasters, or other projectiles that can do damage from afar. Rocket is a blend of this and Mage, as is Iron Man, given Tony Stark's technical acumen (Stark also dabbles in Face, given his charisma and resources). True ranged fighters include the archers Hawkeye and the Green Arrow, and Sir Percival, who was skilled with throwing darts and was raised in the woods by his mother, giving him a unique set of survival skills.<sup>295</sup>

**The Assassin** does not necessarily have to be a killer (though they typically are), but they are characterized by a certain darkness, stealthiness, cunning, and martial skill. Example characters would include Batman, Ant-Man (the second Ant-Man, Scott Lang, is literally a thief before he is chosen to succeed Hank Pym), Daredevil, Black Widow, the Guardians' Gamora, and the X-Men's Nightcrawler.

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<sup>294</sup> Whiting, B. J. "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale." *Mediaeval Studies* 9 (1947): 189–234.

<sup>295</sup> According to accounts of Robert de Boron's now-lost *Perceval*.

**The Rogue** is the wildcard, the smartmouth, the character who projects an image of being the face – an air of confidence – but in fact may harbor some deep feelings of inadequacy. This character is also typically pure of heart, and hides their insecurity behind the mask of a cad. Examples include Rocket Raccoon, Deadpool, Spider-Man, Sir Dagonet (the jester of the Round Table who has had some wildly diverging characterizations throughout the Text<sup>296</sup>) and Sir Bedwyr (Bedivere), who is depicted as one-handed in some accounts (like the Norse god Tyr) and is described in *Culhwch ac Olwen* as the handsomest man in the world.

**The Changeling** or **The Specialist** is a character who is oddly versed in whatever specific weapon, skill, or fighting style is needed to accomplish a task. These characters can be literal shapeshifters like the Martian Manhunter, the X-Men's Morph or Rogue (who can absorb powers and knowledge/expertise through skin-to-skin contact), or can be cybernetic polymaths like the Justice League's Cyborg or the Avengers' Vision, or can be highly specialized and yet simultaneously tremendously powerful, like Aquaman – a literal king of Atlantis whose name is Arthur, but who was raised by his human father – the classical definition of a changeling.<sup>297</sup> These characters are, in essence, Swiss Army knives, and can be as overpowered or as specialized as the story needs. Arthurian versions of this archetype include Galahad – the best knight in the world – and Sir Kay, the same Sir Kay who was Arthur's older foster brother. While

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<sup>296</sup> In the early 13th-century Vulgate Cycle's Prose *Lancelot*, Daguenet is known as the fool or the coward. In the 13th-century chivalric romance, *Palamedes*, Dagonet is an unpredictable berserker with a tragic past: Formerly one of the best knights of the Round Table, he went insane when his new wife was abducted by his own friend, Helior of the Thorn, whom Dagonet then tracks down and kills in revenge. In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, he is Arthur's court fool who is knighted for his loyalty, wit, and humor, and is an expert practical joker. In the 2004 film "King Arthur," Dagonet (played by Ray Stevenson, who would later play the Punisher in 2008's "Punisher: War Zone" and then Thor's rotund warrior companion Volstagg in the Marvel Cinematic Universe) is a brave, self-sacrificing warrior who uses his great strength to shatter the ice on a frozen lake, dooming a Saxon detachment.

<sup>297</sup> If ever there were a direct literary descendant of King Arthur, it would be this King Arthur: Born of a forbidden union, marked as an outsider both by his appearance and by the circumstances of his birth, Orin of Atlantis is given the human name Arthur by his father, lighthouse keeper Thomas Curry. Upon coming of age, Arthur Curry claims his birthright, despite challenges both to his methods and his legitimacy as king, as he has never spent even a day in the underwater kingdom. In the 2018 film starring Jason Momoa, Arthur Curry is also said to be descended from the ancient kings of Atlantis, and in uniting the various undersea kingdoms, achieves strength through reconciliation, peace, and understanding. He eventually attains the crown and the respect of his people.



he is diminished in the French evolution of the story in favor of Lancelot (Kay is turned into a boorish bully), he is in both the Auchinleck and in early Welsh traditions one of Arthur's most trusted and powerful knights. In the early Welsh Arthurian traditions, he could have gone toe-to-toe with Superman: He could fire head from his hands, grow to giant size, and hold his breath for nine days and nights.<sup>298</sup>

**The Brick/The Hammer/The Tank** – whatever you call this character type, one thing's for sure: they mean business. The Brick is the group's powerhouse. In the Auchinleck, that is Sir Gawain, “Whom Crist ȝaf boȝe miȝt & main” (whom Christ gave both might and strength).<sup>299</sup> In the superhero world, the most typical examples are the X-Men's Colossus, the Thing of the Fantastic Four, Drax the Destroyer, Groot, the Incredible Hulk, and Bruce Banner's Hulk-ified cousin Jennifer Walters (She-Hulk). Giant Man (Hank Pym's other other alter ego – aside from Ant-Man and Yellowjacket) and Thor also fit the bill. In DC continuity, Superman, Shazam, the Green Lantern Kilowog, Lobo, and Power Girl – Superman's cousin from an alternate universe – are the heavy hitters. Traditionally, these characters tend to be hulking, physically massive specimens, but they don't need to be: Carol Danvers, AKA Captain Marvel (formerly Ms. Marvel) is one of the most powerful mortals in all of the Marvel universe, and while she is tall – checking in at 5-foot-11, 165 pounds – she is by no means an imposing figure, and would actually be shorter than your average WNBA player. The same can be said for her on-screen counterpart, played by 5-foot-7 Brie Larson.

When Captain America returns from his icy sleep, he is immediately tapped to lead the Avengers because of his tactical brilliance. Bearing his Caliburnian shield, he leads the Avengers (Giant Man/Thor – the Brick; Iron Man – Mage; Thor – a Specialist in this case; and Wasp –

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<sup>298</sup> S. Davies translation, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford 2007) pp. 189.

<sup>299</sup> Auchinleck Manuscript, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 4631

Rogue) into battle against the rampaging Emerald Giant – the Hulk – with his famous cry:

“Avengers Assemble!” The Once and Future King is indeed alive and well, and his sword has become a shield, a hammer, a magic lasso, and a power ring.

## ***Chapter 20: Random Notes of Parchment***

### **From Social Authorship to a New Theory of Historical Transmission**

“On random notes of parchment I’m scrawling my existence,  
Dressed in white. This candle radiates throughout the night  
And it’s never burning out, Never burning out.”

#### **–The Ataris, *Unopened Letter to the World***

There is, admittedly, a clear counterargument to be made against King Arthur as “the first superhero.” There was, for example, no “first dinosaur,” or “first bird.” I’ve opened myself up to that critique by leaning on anthropological and evolutionary terminology, and it’s a fair bone to pick (no pun intended, but hey, accidental puns can still tickle your paleontological funny bone). There is indeed a more gradual development that can be seen, one that is far more incremental and easier to trace.

Popular heroic narratives had long tended toward swashbuckling, rollicking adventure stories of wish fulfillment and fantasy. By the end of the 19th century, as the world was getting smaller, the Industrial Revolution helped birth mass media and the golden age of newspapers, and in a world where the popular imagination – for the first time – became truly global, heroes had to be super-sized. They had to be more exciting, more dynamic, and more broadly appealing – in a word, more secular. As the world shrank, heroes had to get bigger by necessity. So, we began imagining folk heroes even more audacious than Robin Hood.

Zorro, with his all-black attire masking his noble origins, used his rapier, whip, and fearsome black steed Tornado to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against the people of California. Doc Savage’s adventures saw him use his genius-level intellect, Olympic-level athleticism, polymath expertise in all sciences, and master detective skills on rollicking escapades to exotic locales. The Shadow captured the radio waves with his preternatural ability to cloud men’s

minds. The Phantom beguiled superstitious evildoers by seemingly refusing to die as “The Ghost Who Walks,” a reputation enhanced by the supernaturally white pupils behind his domino mask (he was the first masked comic strip character drawn with white eyes) and his pet wolf Devil. Yes, it’s easier to say that the superhero merely evolved because there was a niche to be filled.

That would be a neat and tidy way to dismiss the last couple hundred pages. Except for this: There was a figure that had already filled that niche more than a millennia earlier. A full three centuries before the printing press had even been invented, when books – richly adorned with embellishments and miniatures<sup>300</sup> – were items of luxury reserved for the learned and the elite, the story of King Arthur managed to spread from a tiny backwater island throughout all of Europe in less than 50 years.

So, what of the title of this chapter: the random notes of parchment? Surely, the story of King Arthur wasn’t passed around the Continent on so many scraps like folded pieces of notebook paper from sweaty palm to sweaty palm at the back of a classroom (“Do you like me, Gwen? Check Yes or No – Lance”). No, of course not. The notes of parchment to which I refer are not literal. They are what comes out when the text has fissured, split open, and allowed us to glimpse inside. They represent both what is inside the Text implicitly and what floats around the Text in the air: the ephemera surrounding King Arthur and comic book superheroes. It is such random notes of parchment – these random expressions of culture and of cultural knowledge – that give texture, depth, and meaning to the similarities between comic book superheroes and the tales of King Arthur. Character attributes, biographical similarities, and cultural proximity aren’t enough to assert that the heroes of our day draw their paternity from the stories of Arthur. There

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<sup>300</sup> Early manuscripts in which Arthur appeared contained brightly colored pictures, called miniatures. Where are these in comic books? All over the place! The whole form is built on them – visual shorthand meant to draw eyes of every age and spark imagination.

must be something deeper, something more inherent and more basic, something in the air or the water.

What Geertz touched on, perhaps inadvertently, was a theory of ephemeral knowledge, of a shared awareness or inherited trans-cultural consciousness. It is through this medium that the Text of Arthur touches the Text of comic book superheroes. The thick description inherent in folk/popular culture Texts like both Arthuriana and comic books illustrate that “the things that draw us to literature are often found in the non-literary, that that concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation and revision.” Geertz’s work helps us to access this deeper something, widening “the range of the imaginative constructions to be interpreted.”<sup>301</sup>

The problem with these so-called “non-literary” components of a single work is determining precisely what gets included. For instance: Do an author’s notes in preparation for a work count as literary, as part of the work? What about their reading list? What about the newspapers they read every morning? What about their Internet search history, or the message boards they read? Each of these things has one central element—it is associated with the unitary author. The idea of the unitary author gives readers such an unwieldy list, making the assembly of a whole work (including the non-literary elements)—much less a Text—a futile endeavor. Editors of such works, then, worry more about the flotsam and jetsam associated with a person rather than that which deals with the subject matter. Twentieth century French philosopher and literary critic Michel Foucault elegantly stated that, at some point, “we began to recount the lives of the authors rather than of heroes.”<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>301</sup>Greenblatt, Stephen. “The Touch of the Real.” *Representations*, no. 59, 1997, pp. 14–29.

<sup>302</sup>Foucault, Michel. “What Is an Author?” *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. pp. 890.

The solution to this is one that Barthes suggests—a death of the author, a fading into obscurity of the writer, and an ascent of the reader. But like “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” the concept of the singular author – of authorship in general – is far newer than we think. In the days when Arthurian legend was being forged, the *story* was what mattered, not who got credit for writing it. It’s part of what gives Arthuriana its timeless appeal. A defining characteristic of the scribal culture that held sway both during Arthuriana’s emergence and during the time the Auchinleck was compiled is anonymity in production. Writing about the texts present in the Auchinleck, for example, Loomis says that “we know practically nothing about either the authors or the transcribers of those works.” This scribal culture reinforced a set of unwritten rules by which changes could be made to the story that had in fact persisted since long before Arthur had made the transition from orality to written text. As a nod to that oral tradition, sometimes singing minstrels have been posited as authors, “sometimes as the oral “publishers,” of much of this popular poetry, and the more important manuscripts have been generally attributed to monastic compilers and scribes” (Loomis, 596).

The only reason why monastic compilers and scribes like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, and Sir Thomas Malory are known is that they wrote down, codified, and glossed the most popular and enduring epic hero of the age whose stories and ideas had already existed for centuries as part of a Text in local oral folk tradition. Arthur’s story already had a high Q value not just because it was known far and wide, but because of *how* it became so ubiquitous: through widespread, decentralized cultural authorship and ownership. It was not any one person’s creation. Likewise, comic books largely have no single author or Auteur. Yes, there are standalone works that are marked by exceptional creative talents, or iconic runs by writer-artist teams, but they are but chapters of a larger whole. The staff of creative professionals

who write and draw and edit comics is forever in flux. The “non-literary” of which Geertz writes are those parts of the stories that remain hanging in the air when one generation passes the baton to the next, enabling each new generation to adapt the stories so that they touch their current reality while still retaining essential core truths. When speaking of Arthur and comic book superheroes, it’s more appropriate to dub these creatives “stewards,” rather than “authors.”

It doesn’t matter who writes Arthur or Superman or Captain America because it is the story being told that matters, not the byline. 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.”<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> You Will Believe, 10:38.

## ***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**

Well, I took a walk around the world to ease my troubled mind  
 I left my body lying somewhere in the sands of time  
 But I watched the world float to the dark side of the moon  
 I feel there's nothing I can do, yeah

I watched the world float to the dark side of the moon  
 After all I knew, it had to be something to do with you  
 I really don't mind what happens now and then  
 As long as you'll be my friend at the end

If I go crazy, then will you still call me Superman?  
 If I'm alive and well, will you be there and holding my hand?

### **– Three Doors Down, *Kryptonite***

When the remainder of the filming for “Superman II” was given over to director Richard Lester to helm after creative differences turned the relationship between Donner and producers Ilya and Alexander Salkind icy, Donner — whose origin story is among the most important films in the history of American cinema — flipped.

“I was so pissed off, you can’t believe it,” Donner recalls. “I was ready to go back—obviously not asking for any more money; I’d been paid—and I wanted to go back and Tom [Mankiewicz] and I wanted to go back and Tom and I had in our minds, the completion of [Superman] II. We had a great idea—if [Superman] II went well—we could do [Superman] III and if it did anything we could do [Superman] IV. But they chose to send me this telegram. I was ready to get on a plane and kill because they were taking my baby away from me.”<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> You Will Believe, 59:43.



When given full top-to-bottom control of “Superman III,” Lester delivered a campy Silver Age tale that sent Lois Lane off on a sweepstakes-won vacation, took Clark Kent back to Smallville to reunite with his boyhood crush Lana Lang, introduced a mashed-up riff on Metallo and Brainiac, and leaned into the director’s comic sensibilities by amping up the slapstick and bringing in Richard Pryor as an unwitting villain-turned-sidekick. While the 1983 sequel was less critically and commercially successful than either of the first two installments, it did contain one of the most iconic performances Reeve gave as the character.

Exposed to a corrupted form of Kryptonite synthesized by Pryor’s Gus Gorman, Superman begins to act erratically and carelessly, performing his duties with a bored nonchalance and detachment, when he performs them at all. His attire and countenance both darken until we see him pouring a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label at a tavern during daylight hours while in full costume, wearing a five o’clock shadow on his usually clean-shaven face. After using his heat vision to melt a mirror that shows what he’s become, he flies off to a junkyard, where he splits into two independent beings: Dark Superman and the bespectacled (and yet still super-strong) Clark Kent. Reeve distinguished himself through the care and effort he’d taken in crafting two distinct characters through the ways he portrayed Superman and the bumbling public-facing Clark Kent persona. In this literal fistfight between the warring sides of Kal El’s bifurcated self, he adds even more layers. This Clark Kent is who we imagine the character is whenever he returns to visit his mother in Smallville, the Clark Kent that went to Smallville High, the Clark Kent that goes home from an uneventful day and makes himself dinner before watching a football game. This Clark Kent is who Superman really is – the son of Martha and Jonathan Kent, but also the Last Son of Krypton. This Clark Kent appeared only

once before in the films – when Superman gave up being Superman to live a normal life with Lois in “Superman II.”

Reeve’s portrayal in “Superman III” is a masterclass in character work, unfortunately overshadowed by the goofiness of the overall film. Yet, it illustrates a distinctive attribute shared by both superhero and Arthurian Texts: To paraphrase Walt Whitman, they contain multitudes. They are neither monolithic nor unitary, and they belong to no single individual or entity. Rather, their essential truths are held in trust by a disseminated locus of authorship, a greater super-textual awareness which doubles as an agent of corrective force should any interpretation violate the Text’s animating essence. “The Text is experienced only in an activity of production,” wrote Barthes. “It follows that the text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works)” (Barthes, 157).

At its core, the beef that precipitated Donner’s split with the Salkinds was an argument not just over authorship, but ownership. As a creator, as a fan of the character, and as a part of shaping Superman’s story in the real world, Donner certainly had a right to feel protective. Decades later, actor Chris Evans professed to being both protective and “precious” about his role as Captain America following the satisfying conclusion to his character arc in a dignified sendoff at the end of 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame.” Evans made multiple public statements that he would not reprise the character unless the story did proper justice to the character.<sup>305</sup>

Protectiveness and preciousness are one thing, but possessiveness – that feeling of propriety – is quite another. Donner had started with the best of intentions, but became possessive. That one sin was the beginning of the end for Reeve’s Superman, as “Superman III”

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<sup>305</sup> Fraser, Kevin. “Chris Evans: It Feels Too Soon to Return as Captain America.” *JoBlo*, 17 Apr. 2023, [www.joblo.com/chris-evans-captain-america-return-too-soon/](http://www.joblo.com/chris-evans-captain-america-return-too-soon/).

and 1987's "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace" both underperformed, and the hero did not reappear on the silver screen until 2006.

When the artists and writers who created the first wave of Arthurian superheroes went off to fight in World War II, the publishers, too, felt a sense of ownership. They "began to feel that they were in charge of these characters. The characters became corporate characters controlled more by the corporation."<sup>306</sup>

The sanguine status quo that resulted from this era of McCarthyism and the CCA – in which Batman began carrying a platinum badge and Superman became the ultimate lawful authority – chilled the spirit of subversive, substantive, challenging, literary narratives that had been inherent in the superhero genre since its inception. Yet, it can still be said that superhero comic books of that time reflected and acted out the simmering anxieties of the surrounding culture of that time.

As a disaffected generation moved into adolescence and adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s, those simmering anxieties began to boil over on college campuses, city streets, and in comic books. Marvel's X-Men, introduced in 1963, dealt with prejudice, hatred, and violent repression on a page-ly basis. Stan Lee called the story of the X-Men a "story of bigotry." The idea of mutation – beyond giving writers a convenient excuse to introduce a character with any random superpower without having to explain it – also served as an entry point for any reader who felt ostracized for being born different, whether that difference was racial, religious, sexual, psychological, behavioral, physical, or intellectual.

In 1971, the Nixon Administration requested that Lee do a story about the dangers of drug addiction, so Lee and artists Gil Kane and John Romita worked out a three-issue arc where Spider-Man battled the Green Goblin, and in the process, saved an inner-city youth so stoned that

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<sup>306</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 25:50.

he thinks he can fly. Later on, Harry Osborne – Peter Parker’s best friend and the Green Goblin’s son – gets hooked on pills and nearly dies from an overdose. Months later, DC published a much stronger story in which Speedy – the unfortunately-named former kid sidekick of the Green Arrow – got hooked on heroin.<sup>307</sup>

Green Arrow’s partner, the Green Lantern Hal Jordan, famously dealt with accusations of racism in Green Lantern/Green Arrow #76 (April, 1970), when an African-American man launched this invective against Jordan: “I been readin’ about you ... how you work for the blue skins ... and how on a planet somewhere you helped out the orange skins ... and you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there’s skins you never bothered with --! ... The black skins!”

In the 1980s, Lex Luthor – who had debuted as a mad scientist playing on the anxiety and fear surrounding atomic energy – evolved into a corporate magnate, a ruthless capitalist. Superman, then, took on the incarnation of the new anxieties of a new era as his archnemesis morphed into an exploitative, self-important billionaire industrialist.

Because these Texts – by their very nature – do not abide by the rules of singular authorship (writers and illustrators included), they possess a remarkable malleability, a fluidity that allows them to both retain their timeless fundamental core elements and to evolve so that they can continuously function as acted culture across decades, centuries, or even millennia.

Arthur went from fighting Saxons at Mt. Badon to battling Scots and Danes in the Auchinleck because that was the reality *of that time*. The dominant culture no longer needed him to fight the Saxons because they became that dominant culture – the English (to riff on an old political cartoon: “We have met the enemy, and he is us”)<sup>308</sup> – and had adopted (appropriated)

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<sup>307</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. 54:32.

<sup>308</sup> For a 1970 Earth Day poster about the dangers of pollution, editorial cartoonist Walt Kelly coined the phrase, a satire of a battle report from the War of 1812. In the missive to which Kelly refers, Master Commandant Oliver Perry wrote to Major

Arthur, producing the very manuscript in which his story was being told. Despite his origins, Arthur had grown beyond tribal folk myth, had grown beyond the province or property of any one group, and came to embody the spirit of greater Britain. And, if you buy my take on the Grey Champion (Chapter 15), he eventually came to embody freedom and liberty even in the face of British tyranny.

The Text of Arthur and the Text of superheroes are both continually reinvented and renegotiated to fit times and places and cultures. They are continually remade into different genres and classifications, fulfilling what Barthes required of a Text—that it indeed resists traditional hierarchies and classifications. To experience a Text is to break through the “limits of the rules and of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)” (Barthes, 157). A Text, then, because of its multi-faceted, fluid nature, is interactive; it assimilates the anxieties, attitudes, fears, hopes, values, and ethics of the folk culture it inhabits. Such is, as Geertz says, the “touch of the real.”

The dispersed ephemera – the collective knowledge, the stuff in the air and on the margins – allows for a Text to be participatory, expressive, and indeed democratic. To quote Barthes: “The Text is experienced only in an activity of production. It follows that the text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works” (Barthes, 157).

For example: Independent from comic book continuity, the Superman radio show of the 1950s decided to introduce the glowing green radioactive pieces of Superman’s homeworld as the one thing that could harm him. This mineral – Kryptonite – became Superman’s most famous vulnerability as a direct result of the dissemination and decentralization of authorship, which

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General William Henry Harrison that, after the United States Navy defeated the British in the Battle of Lake Erie, “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” Kelly’s send-up turns the quote into a critique on humanity’s tendency to create our own problems.

allowed for the creation of a space to work out societal anxieties surrounding the use and abuse of atomic power.<sup>309</sup>

Kryptonite may have originated in the radio drama, but because of its resonance with the larger message and cultural function of the greater Text, it became essential to Superman's canon. Superhero comic books, like the Arthurian Text, are marked by a persistent body of shared knowledge that exists beyond the margins of the pages of any singular work – knowledge that, while created by social authorship, informs all parts of the greater superheroic Text. Just as later redactors added canonical events to Arthur retroactively, so too do superhero redactors influence already-established conventions. Donner's sterile, icy, and ethereal depiction of Krypton came to define how the planet was depicted in comics via such retrograde signaling. Such retrograde action, though, is rare, and is often the exception that proves the rule.

More often than not, when an executive, editor, director, publisher, or producer imposes their own vision on these characters (often in an effort to capture a larger audience by capitalizing on a fleeting trend), the Text rejects it like a transplanted organ. These Texts can bear redaction and modernization, but only insofar as it makes sense. They change with the times enough to stay relevant, but not so much as to ignore their roots.<sup>310</sup>

During the 1990s, several attempts were made to revisit the Superman film franchise. The sci-fi monster-mish-mash of ideas that were thrown around—a black leather suit, an S shield that came off to form daggers, a giant alien spider monster, a polar bear sidekick—were so loudly dissonant that they would quickly become dated and would overwhelm the underlying sensibilities of the character, turning him into just another mass-produced 'edgy' antihero cynically playing to the Hot Topic crowd. Those at the helm of that ill-fated project ignored what

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<sup>309</sup> [Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman](#), 12:36.

<sup>310</sup> [You Will Believe](#), 1:36:00

makes Superman ... well ... Superman: the folkloric roots, aspirational allegory, the earnest sense of purpose; in a word: the touch of the Arthurian. That project never made it to screen.

While heroes do adapt to the times and act as reflections of the current cultural moment, the key to their longevity, their persistence, and their endurance as symbols is that their Texts are built on timeless foundations: the emotional truth of their Outsider's journey, the way they fulfill the MPIC conventions, their Proppian spheres of action, and the four roles that superheroes inherit from Arthur, who in turn inherited them from David and Alexander.

The Textual nature of Arthur and of comic book superheroes allows each of the different cultures, societies, and creators who touch the Texts to add elements. Ideas like the Once and Future King (from the Roman *Restitutor Orbis*), the dragon symbol (a combination of Sarmatian and Welsh iconography), the sword in the stone (from the culture of the Sarmatian cavalrymen), and the wizard (Welsh folktales) grew out of the folk oral traditions proximal to Arthurian lore's origin point. Originating from the same time and place as a theorized historical Arthur, it's no surprise that they became part of the Text's immutable core.

But what about the Round Table? Just as Kryptonite is essential to any conception of Superman, Arthur just isn't Arthur with at least a reference to that famous furniture. Both arrived significantly after the Text's origin point: Kryptonite was introduced over the radio more than a decade after Superman's first comic appearance, and the Round Table was introduced by Wace in 1155 – two decades after Geoffrey of Monmouth's seminal work seemingly codified Arthurian lore. Both Kryptonite and the Round Table became integral to their respective Texts because they resonated with one of the core truths of the Text. Kryptonite gave a seemingly invulnerable alien a very human weakness: A piece of his home that was uniquely toxic to him, just as an overtly Jewish surname could make a refugee or immigrant unemployable in America in the first half of

the 20th century. The Table – where all those seated had equal station and stakes – rhymed with Arthur’s pro-social mission, a tradition which, by that point, had roots more than four centuries old. Arthur’s celebrated role as a leader who united disparate tribes in the common cause of defending their homeland – the bedrock upon which the notion of his pro-social mission and moral code was built – was a distinguishing feature of the battle chronicles that represent his earliest written mentions which served as the basis for Geoffrey’s Historia.

Those mentions, though, are still not primary sources, written 200-300 years after any historical antecedent would have been active. Likewise, Homer’s account of the Trojan War in The Iliad does not purport to be a primary source, but rather represents Homer’s conscious participation in an already-established tradition of oral composition and transmission. In the centuries after Homer, “these songs were recited by bards and continually changed by them until, in the middle of the sixth century, (when) the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus had them joined together in their present form and written down” (De Vries, 3). This tradition of heroic song and oral composition did not die with Achilles. The means by which those epics were transmitted and created continued with the tales of Arthur and his knights. Like the Homeric epics, the stories and songs of Arthur were kept alive over the centuries through oral transmission and song.

By the time of the battle chronicles, Arthur’s reputation was already well established through oral transmission and interpretation. Even well into the period during which the Auchinleck was compiled, it was impossible to distinguish between those who composed a work and those who performed it, because both were active in the creative process.<sup>311</sup>

Even once set down on paper, the Arthurian Text retained a structure not unlike the interior of our planet Earth: Distinct layers of material differentiated by their specific densities

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<sup>311</sup> Eisenstein, Elizabeth. The Printing Press as an Agent of Change : Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. pp. 121.



and viscosities (solid, semi-fluid, or liquid), surrounding a solid core. The Proppian spheres, the four roles, and the story beats that formed the solid core could be surrounded by other elements of varying importance and canonicity.

There was the thin, brittle, ever-shifting crust: the form in which the story was expressed, which ranged from bloody battle chronicles to *vitae* to chivalric romance to what we would today identify as high fantasy/adventure.

There was the highly-liquid: Each of the 215 extant manuscripts of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia has its own set of textual variances. Each different scribe set down the text in their own hand, with their own native dialect, spelling, and even grammar.<sup>312</sup>

There was the semi-fluid: Creative narrative additions or stylistic alterations were made to varying degrees of success. French scribes, such as Wace and Layamon, purported to be 'translating' Geoffrey, but in fact added episodes of their own, giving rise to Sir Lancelot.<sup>313</sup> The editors of the Auchinleck could ignore these much-later French additions to the story because they resided in this semi-fluid space – while popular, they weren't structurally important.

By the time Arthur is compiled into the Auchinleck, the descendants of the Saxons had made alterations at nearly every level: They rendered inscriptions upon the blade of Excalibur in English, turned it into a Christian symbol, and sent Arthur on Crusades against the Danes, the Scots, and the Irish—the latter two being Arthur's former literary and likely historical allies. The medieval French redactors added romance, chivalry, and intrigue to the legend, introducing a steamy love affair between Arthur's wife and his most trusted knight. They turned Arthur's

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<sup>312</sup> How much does language matter? Let's take a look at the name of Excalibur: In Welsh, it was *Caledfwlch*. In Middle Cornish, it is called *Calesvol*, etymologically an exact Middle English cognate of *Caledfwlch*. Still with me? Good. Geoffrey Latinized it to *Caliburnus* (possibly influenced by the medieval Latin spelling *calibs* of the Classical Latin *chalybs*, which is derived from the Greek word for steel – *chályps* (χάλυψ)). In Old French, it became *Caliburne*, unless it was called *Caliburn*, *Chaliburne*, *Caliburne*, *Calibuerne*, *Calabrum*, *Callibourc*, *Calabrun*, or *Chalabrun*. The Auchinleck and other manuscripts use variations of *Escalibor* such as *Chalabrum*, *Calibore*, *Callibor*, *Caliborne*, *Calliborc*, *Escallibore* and *Estalibore*. Various other spellings in later medieval works include *Calibourch*, *Calibourn*, *Calibourne*, *Calibure*, *Escaliber*, *Escalibur*, *Excalibor*, and of course the familiar *Excalibur*.

<sup>313</sup> Norris J. Lacy. "French Arthurian Tradition (Medieval)." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

nephew Medraut into Mordred, the product of an incestuous rendezvous between Arthur and his half-sister. They also added the quest for the Holy Grail, which has become central in many retellings of the Arthurian legend.<sup>314</sup> While the essential core truths of the Text remained clearly identifiable, scribal projects like the Auchinleck could make changes to the outer layers, altering the chronology of events, plot elements, character names and genealogies to serve its rhetorical purpose. That purpose is evident in the manuscript's form: It is not as richly adorned as other manuscripts of the period are. It was not meant to sit idly as a display piece.<sup>315</sup> Though it exists materially as a singular work, it was paradoxically intended to be a Text in its own right – participatory, interactive, and of the people.

The Auchinleck was meant to be used, to be performed, to be recited. It was meant to give life to a nascent English literary tradition by accessing the oral tradition associated with Classical heroes like Alexander and biblical heroes like King David. Its stories, like the heroic songs of old, were meant to be shared orally in verse and song, not read alone in silence. It was the story that was of paramount importance, not the authors and artists.

In the same way, superhero works – be they film or paper – are collaboratively produced by whole staffs of writers, editors, pencilers, inkers, colorists, actors, directors, producers, and artists who collaborate with each other under the direction of an executive editor or producer – not unlike the Auchinleck's Scribe 1 – who determines overall direction and maintains the story's fidelity with respect to the core elements of each of the Texts involved. But even those projects sometimes strike a dissonant chord, one which will be noted and eventually corrected by the decentralized author/readers.

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<sup>314</sup> The empty seat at the Round Table that comes to be reserved for the achiever of the Grail – the Siege Perilous – can itself be traced back to Welsh, Cornish, and Breton mythology. A theory posited by R. S. Loomis in Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (Academy Chicago; revised ed. 1997) states that the “dangerous seat” may be a half-remembered version of a Celtic kingship ritual that has parallels in the Irish Lia Fáil.

<sup>315</sup> The Auchinleck Manuscript Project. Ed. Dr. Allison Wiggins. July 2003. National Library of Scotland. 1 May 2008 <<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/physical.html>>.

While far removed from his more Arthurian brethren, actor Ryan Reynolds' Deadpool is the most gleeful prosecutor of the type of corrective fan policing that maintains the integrity and fidelity of superhero Text. Reynolds – a Canadian motormouth known for his quick wit, subtle vulgarity and effortless, nonchalant, almost-bordering-on-polite delivery of wildly raunchy material – was first associated with the fourth-wall-breaking Marvel antihero when he was name-checked in Deadpool & Cable #2 in 2004. In that issue, the Merc With a Mouth describes his unmasked face as “Ryan Reynolds crossed with a Shar-Pei.” The characters Reynolds had typically played up to that point were, for all intents and purposes, amped up versions of his own personality, which just so happened to perfectly reflect Deadpool's self-referential sense of R-rated meta humor.

After first playing a neutered version of the character in 2009's “X-Men Origins: Wolverine,” Reynolds felt duty-bound to redeem both himself and the character. In that movie, the assassin and mercenary famous for his rapidfire mid-battle banter and unending stream-of-consciousness meta commentary had his lips sewn shut and was turned into a cybernetic meat puppet with Cyclops's optic blasts instead of his trademark healing factor. After beheading this humorless zombie “Weapon 11,” Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) – whose long and tangled history of being a mutant guinea pig has included horrific psychological and neurological trauma up to and including false memory implants and mind control – has his memory erased by what amounted to a magic bullet. It was a low point for both characters.

After relentlessly pursuing a solo Deadpool film for years afterward, Reynolds achieved wild success with the first Deadpool film in 2017. The follow-up, “Deadpool 2” (2018), saw the character skip through time righting past wrongs during a post-credits montage. Reynolds-as-Deadpool shoots a past version of Reynolds-the-actor in the head before he could

accept what turned out to be a horribly miscast lead role in the 2011 critical and commercial failure “Green Lantern.” He then unceremoniously kills off the heretically silent version of Deadpool that appeared in “Origins.”

Reynolds completed his decades-long rehabilitation of the character as executive producer and star of 2024’s “Deadpool & Wolverine,” which not only brought Jackman back to the role he ostensibly retired in the neo-Western-noir “Logan” (2017), but put him in Wolverine’s iconic blue and yellow tiger-stripe comic costume for the first time on film. While Rob Liefeld and Chris Claremont created Deadpool and Wolverine, respectively, it has been Reynolds and Jackman who have defined them for generations of fans and, in many ways, distilled the purest essences of those characters.

Similarly, while Jerome Siegel and Joe Schuster created Superman and gave him life, later artists, writers, and fans – like Richard Donner – have contributed to and shaped the Superman Text and defined and interpreted him in many new and different ways – some good, some bad, and some at the same time.

It was Donner who defined the ethereal, cold, and crystalline look of Krypton that would become comic book canon within a decade, and it was Frank Miller’s 1986 miniseries “The Dark Knight Returns” that inspired a return to grim and gritty Batman stories that in turn inspired the look and feel of Gotham and the Dark Knight in 1989’s Tim Burton/Michael Keaton/Jack Nicholson film. These different media and author-reader creators participate in a constant dialogue, recursively interpreting and re-interpreting each media depiction of a Text.

Because of this constant renegotiation, conversation, and distillation, Superman and the other superheroes – just like King Arthur – can remain essentially the same, and yet are able to evolve as writing and illustrating techniques evolve, and as storytelling becomes more

sophisticated. Even the material look and feel of comic books and comic book art have changed with the times to the point where the visuals contained within are considered true art. Humans are visual creatures, after all, and the look of the story is a large part of how the books are received. But form takes its cues from content, and instead of being limited to four-color printing, artists now use digital tools and employ color and shadow to set the narrative tone, as Jim Lee and Scott Williams did in the dark and brooding characterization of Superman in Superman For Tomorrow.

It is the natural evolution from the artwork that adorned the pages of Arthurian works even in the earliest medieval manuscripts, illustrations that have been so highly valued in their own right that many were excised for profit.<sup>316</sup> Witness the painted works of Alex Ross, whose lifelike portraits and comic panels give dimensionality and emotional weight to characters who have lived in two dimensions for decades.

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<sup>316</sup> Chen, W. Fiona. "Tearing Books for Education's Sake: Otto Ege and His Manuscript Leaves." *Omeka RSS*, Fordham University: Medieval Art and the American Public: A Digital Narrative, [medievalartus.ace.fordham.edu/exhibits/show/otto-manuscripts-leaves/otto-manuscripts-leaves-essay](http://medievalartus.ace.fordham.edu/exhibits/show/otto-manuscripts-leaves/otto-manuscripts-leaves-essay). Accessed 9 May 2024.

## ***Chapter 22: It's Not Easy to Be Me***

### **How Heroes Negotiate Real-World Horrors**

I'm more than a bird, I'm more than a plane  
 I'm more than some pretty face beside a train  
 And it's not easy to be me  
 I wish that I could cry  
 Fall upon my knees  
 Find a way to lie  
 'Bout a home I'll never see

It may sound absurd, but don't be naive  
 Even heroes have the right to bleed  
 I may be disturbed, but won't you concede  
 Even heroes have the right to dream?  
 And it's not easy to be me

### **–Five for Fighting, *Superman***

Alex Ross spent more time thinking of and preparing for what to do for the cover for Marvels #2, “Monsters Among Us,” than he did on any other issue of the acclaimed miniseries charting the history of the Marvel universe through the camera lens of a man-on-the-street news photographer. His first sketch was one of the original five X-Men – Angel – flying away from a mutant-hunting Sentinel robot.<sup>317</sup> But then, he changed his mind.

Angel – the alter ego of old-wealth scion Warren Worthington III – first used his mutation (large, bird-like white wings protruding from his shoulder blades and flight-tailored physiology) to save some of his schoolmates from a school fire. Dressed in a nightshirt and a blond wig, he was mistaken for a heavenly seraph by onlookers as he flew away. Ross abandoned the cover depicting Angel fleeing for one that came closer to evoking what those onlookers must have felt.

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<sup>317</sup> Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross. Marvels 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York: Marvel Publishing, 2004. pp. 390.

His next sketch showed a frosted-lens view of Worthington, gaze tilted upward, wings outstretched, holding a mutant child in his arms, saving her from a hostile crowd. Ross used watercolor and gouache paints to create a “transparent and opaque” image that seemed at once divine and yet threatening, with rocks and other missiles being hurled at the airborne mutant from the mob below.<sup>318</sup>

Of Ross’s vast oeuvre for publishers major and minor, it is this image – that of an angel coming to save a child in need – that is widely considered one of his most iconic works. The superhero: Not quite god, not quite human; familiar yet marked as different; something awesome, in the truest sense of the word –like a work by any of the Renaissance masters, this piece suggests the possibility of divine salvation, the horror at the prospect of a final judgment, and yet also something in between. It simultaneously places superheroes in the spaces of the divine, the infernal, and the terrestrial.

Superheroes take up the questions and anxieties of the public that creates them, particularly in regards to the mysteries of the divine. Our superheroes have become our secular messiahs, and the producers and creators of comic book superheroes have become conscious of this ascendance, and used it as a refrain within superheroic Text.

Marvel’s X-Men appealed to religious minorities, racial minorities, sexual minorities—anyone under the sun who had ever felt Othered. Michael Chabon, author of the superhero novel The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay, argued that, when they were introduced, the X-Men books presented the “idea of being simultaneously special and persecuted.” This idea wasn’t novel in the world of accepted high-culture literature, but it was viewed as revolutionary in comic books.<sup>319</sup> In the aforementioned passages from the Arthur work

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid

<sup>319</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. 59:45.

and the Alexander work that appear in the Auchinleck, the coronations of both the titular characters are marred by contempt and jealousy from fellow royals. In much the same way, the abilities that the Marvel mutants have—and never asked for, much as the young Arthur never *asked* to be the King—are cause for tension and friction with the un-powered human population.

In the 2000 film, “X-Men,” Senator Kelly (Bruce Davison) likens mutants to living weapons – not human beings with their own rights and agency – while challenging another senator on the phone: “You’re in favor of registering handguns, aren’t you? Well, some of these kids possess far more power than any handgun ... No, I *don’t* see a difference, all I see is weapons in our classrooms.” Many mutants are exploited by baseline humans looking to use their abilities for profit or worse – as a source of resources they can use to harm other mutants or as the subjects of agonizing, gruesome, and gratuitously inhumane medical experiments. Avi Arad, former head of Marvel Studios and the man responsible for movies such as the X-Men and Spider-Man trilogies at Fox and Sony, said that growing up in Israel and receiving re-prints of the X-Men comics, he could easily understand the metaphor: “It was about the right to live, the right to exist,” a theme which Arad, Lee, Kirby, Siegel, and Schuster understood all too well.

Emma Frost, a key character in the X-Men world, confronted Tony Stark (Iron Man) during the Civil War event of 2006, which ripped the Marvel Universe in two. In response to Stark’s request for the X-Men to join the pro-Superhuman Registration Act ranks, Frost shoots back: “Where were you when our babies were being killed?”<sup>320</sup> – a reference to the mass mutant holocaust perpetrated by mutant-hunting Sentinel robots, which were conceived of by anti-mutant scientists, built by human hands, and whose construction was funded by government contracts.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (p). Civil War #3, p. 21 (July. 2006), Marvel Comics.

<sup>321</sup> Grant Morrison (w) and Frank Quietly (p). “E is for Extinction (Part 2).” New X-Men Vol. 1 #115 (Aug. 2001), Marvel Comics.



For mutants, the SRA is as much of a violation as a number tattooed on the forearm: They are not willing volunteers who took a serum or put on armor to become superheroes; they could not help being born with their mutations any more than Captain America could help being born with blond hair. Because of the history of pervasive bigotry in the Marvel Universe (sadly reflective of our own), any compulsory registration of super-powered beings would be far more dangerous than, say, the willing registration of adults who choose to act as superheroes (just as one chooses to become a police officer or enlist in the military). While adult superheroes must worry about a supervillain getting a hold of their secret identities, mutants as a whole marginalized community of men, women, and children would be known as mutants by a government which has – at best – a spotty historical record when it comes to its relationships with marginalized communities. These and other eerie and unsettling echoes of the Third Reich – from which the parents of the aforementioned comic book legends had fled in the early 1930s – bubble just beneath the surface of Frost's invective.

But while superheroes have dealt with social issues for decades now, there have been two notable omissions from the pages of comic books. While Captain America was fighting Nazi soldiers and Japanese conspirators, a far greater evil was lurking behind the barbed wire of Fortress Europe: the horror of the Holocaust. Though many comic writers and illustrators were of Jewish descent, from families who had fled Europe because of the rising tide of antisemitism, neither the quintessential immigrant Superman nor the man who was wrapped in America's ideals of freedom – Captain America – confronted the abject horrors and unspeakable atrocities visited upon Europe's Jews face-to-face. They did not confront the consequences of real hatred.

Later stories and books have inserted flashback episodes into Captain America's history, showing him liberating concentration camps (one X-Men: The Animated Series episode even

showed Cap liberating the concentration camp which housed a young Eric Lensherr, the man who would later become Magneto), but even though stories of Hitler's atrocities were being passed back to the home front, not a single contemporary comic book put them on the page. The books of the time glamorized war and combat and "in the comic books, the Americans always won."<sup>322</sup> The true horrors of the war, and of the Holocaust, did not fit into this paradigm: "We felt the audience wouldn't be interested in that," said Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*. "They couldn't understand it."

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

In the early 1960's, when comic book characters were still strictly adhering to the 1950's status-quo dictated by the CCA, many characters were featured in Vietnam-themed stories. But as the decade progressed, the human toll of the war mounted, as seen in the steadily increasing casualty numbers on the nightly news. As the rationale for the United States' involvement stretched further and further, and as the protests and counter-culture began to acquire steam, superheroes disappeared from the southeast Asian jungles. It became clear to comic book creators that this wasn't like World War II, when "we just could all see what a menace Hitler was," according to Lee. Vietnam was muddled and unclear. After the 1950's Captain America's run was cut short because it wasn't in line with the previously-idealistic and freedom-fighting persona, it became apparent to writers of the mid-1960's that maybe the government wasn't always right.

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<sup>322</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked. 20:00

“After a while, I think we weren’t that sure that ‘Commies’ were the greatest evil in the world,” Lee said. “I tried to avoid stories about the war. The Vietnam War, to me, was too tragic a thing.”<sup>323</sup>

After Vietnam, attitudes about what comic books should address began to change. They once again began to reflect the world around them. They couldn’t ignore what their readers and writers saw every day: drug use, urban blight, discrimination, violence, the sexual revolution, and corporate greed. After all, many inhabited real addresses: The Avengers Mansion, a city-block-sized complex, was located at 890 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and was inspired by the Frick Museum at 1 East 70th Street, a building Stan Lee used to walk by on his way to work every day.

Like the Avengers, many of Marvel’s heroes tended to be based close to the home office in New York. The Fantastic Four lived in the fictional Baxter Building, which became part of the Marvel New York’s skyline and is fictionally located at the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Madison Avenue. Daredevil patrolled Hell’s Kitchen. Spider-Man swung through Manhattan. Luke Cage was born and raised in Harlem. Captain America has lived in apartments in both Brooklyn (where he was born) and the Bronx.<sup>324</sup> So when, on an early September morning in 2001, two jet airliners crashed into the Twin Towers, the superheroes – like King Arthur – had to react to the real world.

The heroes, however, didn’t go to war as they did in the 1940’s. This wasn’t a war just yet. This was a rescue operation. This was something that hit home. Joe Quesada, then Editor-in-Chief of Marvel, remembered his thoughts on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001: “No longer are two 110-story buildings falling to the ground the stuff of fantasy. We felt it. We were

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid, 54:08

<sup>324</sup> In New Avengers #48-51 (February to May 2009), it is listed as being located in the Bronx, but in several issues of Captain America Vol. 5 (2005-2009), it had been located in Brooklyn.

in New York when it fell. I felt the ground tremble.” Bradford Wright, author of Comic Book Nation (2003), said that “no one could have imagined September 11 unless they read comic books ... It sounded like a comic book plot, like something Dr. Doom would do.”<sup>325</sup>

In the first Spider-Man film, editors had to delete a scene that showed Spider-Man spinning a web between the two World Trade Center towers. Spider-Man is the most visible of New York-based heroes, so the missing scene – the absence of which speaks volumes – was not the only representation of Web Head mourning his city. It felt only right that Spider-Man would be personally affected by the attacks, and as a tribute, the cover of Amazing Spider-Man #36 was left blank. On a black background, only the white masthead appeared. Inside, splash pages of the web-slinger viewing the destruction were haunting and fittingly wordless. “This picture of Spider-Man looking at Ground Zero, it’s compelling, it’s emotional,” Arad said. “It represents all of us.”<sup>326</sup>

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

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<sup>325</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 1:22:20

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid*, 1:23:22

With his pencil and brush, this Norman Rockwell of comic books had gifted us realistic depictions of superheroes that show the toll of their toils: a roadmap of scars on Bruce Wayne's back as he removes his cape; an exhausted Superman slouching in a chair in the middle of a dimly-lit apartment, caught mid-wardrobe change in a rumpled, unbuttoned dress shirt hanging over his iconic suit; a curvy Wonder Woman who stands just as tall as Superman, challenging the male gaze by combining sexuality with her strength and powerful build; versions of heroes in their mid-40s with crows feet and a bit of body fat; and a winged mutant dodging bricks and vitriol as he saves frightened children from our worst impulses, like an angel from above. This was more of that same reality – a more mature and realistic look at our heroes that somehow was no less hopeful and inspiring.

So, too, did comics mature. They didn't shy away from reality, but never gave up hope. The takes on the tragedy in comics were far different from World War II. Stan Lee opined that "it would be corny and in bad taste to have a cartoon character punching a Muslim in the face and saying 'We'll get you!' No, that wouldn't work."<sup>327</sup> Artist Jim Steranko created a poster, featuring Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch of the World War II super-team, the Invaders. It recalled the glory days of the war, when superheroes were enthusiastically united against their common enemy. Post-Sept. 11 comics could not, and did not have that. There was no single country against which to direct anger. No easy target. No more room for racialized propaganda in a modern, global economy. But there was still room for superheroes in a world that now, more than ever, needed them. It was a world of humbled heroes, but of heroes nonetheless.

Like the historical Arthur, operating in the twilight of the Roman Empire, superheroes now faced the possibility that the American Way may not be *the* way, after all. As they did in the

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 1:24:50

1970's, heroes once again began questioning the government, and re-focusing their efforts on people. Captain America discovered that the United States government was funding terrorist activities, a revelation that began the deterioration—once again—of his relationship with the government that “owned” the uniform he wore. It's a dialogue that continues to this day, as an increasingly fractured and tribalized America disagrees on more than just policy, but on the very essence of what truth, justice, and the American way actually represent.

## ***Chapter 23: Somebody, Save Me!***

### **The Search for a Secular Messiah**

Somebody save me,  
 Let your warm hands break right through it,  
 Somebody save me,  
 I don't care how you do it, just  
 Stay, stay  
 C'mon, I've been waiting for you

### **– Remy Zero, *Somebody Save Me*, the opening theme for *Smallville* (2001-2011, Warner Bros. Television)**

In “Superman Returns,” Superman takes Lois up for her first flight in the five years that he has been away from Earth. In that time, she ostensibly wrote a Pulitzer-Prize-winning piece called “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.” He takes her high up above the city of Metropolis, and asks her, “Listen. What do you hear?” Lois responds, “Nothing.” Superman looks down with sad eyes at his adopted home and says distantly, “I hear everything. You wrote that the world doesn’t need a savior, but everyday I hear people crying for one.”

Messianic motifs such as these are directly inherited from King Arthur and his role as *Restitutor Orbis*. Arthur is said, in the Auchinleck tale, to having the “sengreal”<sup>328</sup>– the ‘blood royal,’ a term also associated with Jesus of Nazareth, who was of the “blood royal” of Israel, specifically the line of King David.

The concept of the so-called *Restitutor Orbis*, or the more-familiar Judeo-Christian Messiah, brings the purpose of the David work within the Auchinleck into stark focus. David is claimed in the New Testament to be the progenitor of the bloodline that would produce the Messiah.<sup>329</sup> Furthermore, Psalm 51, which the David work paraphrases, is written at the point in

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<sup>328</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 2750

<sup>329</sup> Described in detail in Matthew 1:1-17

the biblical narrative immediately after King David has committed adultery with Bathsheba. The timing of that composition within the biblical chronology is key to David's connection with Arthur because of the absence of the adultery storyline from the Auchinleck's Arthur story at a point in the development of Arthurian myth where there were already several such widely-known stories about both Arthur<sup>330</sup> and of course Guinevere. The placement of the psalm in such close proximity to Arthur not only suggests a continuity of the Davidic line, but also presents a literary mechanism which redeems Arthur and Guinevere as a viable couple. Instead of their relationship being characterized by deceit and tragedy, Arthur is evermore the knight in shining armor to Guinevere's damsel in distress. She swoons as a teenaged Arthur rides into battle:

G[v]eneoure sat on þe cite walle  
 & þe oþer leuedis alle,  
 Of Arthour seiþe justing þis,  
 On him þai laiden al þe priis.<sup>331</sup>

It serves to stand in for the well-known adultery storylines and in a way, apologize for them and to retroactively patch up the relationship between Arthur and Guinevere.

In order for Arthur to fulfill his obligations with respect to the messianic aspects of the Davidic line, however, he had to first be de-paganized and turned into a Christian religious figure, which included glossing his enemies as evil Saracens.

Though the Danes, Scots, and Irish are light-skinned and European, the work still codes them similarly to how it codes Muslim Saracens, using the same language as another Auchinleck text, the *King of Tars*.<sup>332</sup> This crusading narrative does not start with Arthur himself, but with his father, who – to fight for King Angys – must battle Saracens “of Danmark.”<sup>333</sup> This bestows a

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<sup>330</sup> Dixon-Kennedy, 32

<sup>331</sup> Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6375-6378

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., ll. 6374

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., ll. 2067



familial history of fealty to Christianity, and creates a lineage of fighting for the faith that echoes that of Jesus, whose own ancestor was Israel's great warrior king who expanded the Judean kingdom to its greatest extent.

To even further code Arthur as a messianic hero, the Auchinleck's king thanks God or Jesus for each of his great victories in battle ("& tho he thonked the king of glorie / that him hadde ȝouen the victory / To ouercomen his fomen,"<sup>334</sup>). Additionally, Arthur is seen as the chief molester of the Saracens, doing them "grete schame & grete pines."<sup>335</sup> His knights, especially Gawain, are said to have been given, by Christ himself no less, "both might & main."<sup>336</sup> Furthermore, the ability of Gawain to double his strength at midday is not seen as a type of pagan sorcery, but rather that his "strengthe is dubled bi God aboue"<sup>337</sup>. By creating a type of crusading discourse, with the heretofore pagan Excalibur shining as a figuration of the cross used in the service of God by slaying Saracens ("With Esclabor his swerd so gode, / That day he schad so michel blode"<sup>338</sup>), Arthur is firmly placed within the realm of a potential Christian messiah, and as a result of the connection in the Auchinleck to the David text, of the very same Davidic royal line (the blood royal) as Jesus.

Speaking of the Nazarene, the comic book character most often connected with him would be Kal El of Krypton. While I've mentioned the vaguely Hebraic-sounding name in earlier chapters, I've held back on the actual translation until now, and for good reason. In Kryptonian, "Kal El" translates as "Star Child." Not quite messianic enough? How about the Hebrew: In Hebrew, the suffix, "-El" means "of God," and put together, the Hebrew phrase קול-אל can mean "voice of God." Clark Kent is his immigrant name, much as the name Jesus

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., ll.3368-3372

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 4412

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 4632

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 5221

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 6257-8

Christ is a combination of a Latinization of the Hebrew name Joshua, and the Greek “*Khristós*,” or, “anointed one.”

The Richard Donner-Christopher Reeve movie “Superman” (1978) – which began the modern age of cinematic superhero storytelling – was awash in divine imagery: Superman’s home planet of Krypton was portrayed as a place glowing with white, ethereal light. Marlon Brando’s Jor El appears repeatedly as a disembodied voice or glowing countenance, evoking an image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Of those films, “Smallville” co-creator Alfred Gough remarked, “You see him three times: at birth, once when he’s in his teenage years, and then he suddenly appears at 30 to take on his mantle and save the world.”<sup>339</sup>

Imagery and lines from “Superman Returns” – the spiritual sequel to the Donner films – reinforced that Christ allegory: After using all of his strength to excise a cancerous, Kryptonite-laden lump of New Krypton that Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) created off the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, Superman flies it out beyond the Earth’s atmosphere, throwing it into space. His energy spent, Superman’s eyes close, and he falls back to Earth, his legs held together and his arms outstretched in an image evocative of Jesus on the Cross. The same image is seen in Zack Snyder’s “Man of Steel” (2013) as Henry Cavill’s interpretation of the character exits a Kryptonian ship orbiting Earth, and again in Snyder’s “Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice,” when a desiccated Superman, having been struck by a nuclear weapon aimed at the monstrous Doomsday, falls back to Earth, arms outstretched.

“There’s definitely an allegory, a Judeo-Christian allegory that’s happening in the mythology of Superman, right up to the point that he descends from the heavens,” director Bryan Singer said.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup>Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman. DVD. Dir. Kevin Burns. Warner Home Video, 2006. 1:27:14.

<sup>340</sup> Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 46:50.

The savior role is not isolated to Superman. Green Lantern Hal Jordan tries to undo the destruction of his home city during the “Death of Superman” saga, but his rage and trauma-warped vision of righteousness lead him to destroy the entire Green Lantern Corps and become the fallen Parallax. He tries to be a savior, but the savior role lies not in the obliteration of past wrongs by any means necessary, but rather by lifting up a fallen world. When Jordan realizes his error, he sacrifices himself to defeat the villain Sun-Eater, re-igniting the sun, saving the world, and becoming the Spectre, a heroic identity known as God’s divine agent on Earth.<sup>341</sup>

When Captain America was brought back (for all intents and purposes, resurrected) in the 1960s, he takes on a new mission. Rather than serving as a more-or-less solo hero fighting against the Nazis and fascism, he is now the leader of the Avengers, who don’t just fight for any one nation, but the whole world. That conversion (no pun intended) bears a striking resemblance to how the Christian Bible rhetorically positions Jesus as a figure who bridges the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” by renegotiating the covenant made between God and the Jews: A Jew by birth, Jesus is resurrected not just to overthrow the Roman empire and expel its occupying forces from Judea for his own people’s sake, but to be a savior to the world through his sacrifice. The crucifixion of Jesus was positioned as a substitute – in perpetuity – for the sacrifices at the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem, which, according to Daniel 9:27, were to cease.

Libraries full of books, dissertations, theses, and philosophies have been dedicated to the political, national, ethical, moral, social, and psychological repercussions of this biblical rhetoric, to say nothing about the historical evidence for Jesus of Nazareth, the historicity of the Gospels, the literary nature of scripture, and its function as propaganda or as political Text. To be clear: I do not presume to litigate any of these points here. However, for the purposes of this work, my views are thus: I am treating the Bible as a (really) long novel, written and conceived by fallible

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<sup>341</sup> Daniel Wallace. “Parallax.” [DC Comics Encyclopedia](#). 2004.

human beings (mostly men). As a work of literature, then, the figures within it are to be treated as characters, just like King Arthur, Captain America, and Superman. They are all characters who have had a supremely profound impact on our real world, to be sure, but they are here treated as characters nonetheless. That's why writers, artists, theologians, historians, clerics, musicians, and sculptors have continually renegotiated and reinvented them over the millennia.

The question posed in these post-modern times, at least theologically, is how would otherwise-normal people deal with being granted godlike superpowers? How would *we* choose, if and when the time came? To paraphrase Brown's Prof. Robert Langdon in The DaVinci Code: Would people destroy faith or would they renew it?

Works like The Boys and Watchmen have a bleak answer: They'd be just like most everyday people who gain unexpected and unearned power: Selfish assholes. Civilians caught up in their battles are treated like incidental damaged property. They are nothing more than collateral damage. In the opening scenes of the Amazon Prime television series adaptation of The Boys, speedster A-Train all but vaporizes protagonist Hughie's girlfriend while running to procure illicit drugs. Hughie is left holding her disembodied hands. Over the next few episodes, the corporate apparatus that manages "supes" tries to get him to accept a financial settlement in exchange for signing a non-disclosure agreement, so that A-Train's public image isn't tarnished. In the comic/animated series "Invincible," the Superman character – Omni-Man – is secretly softening the world up for invasion by his alien race, and members of the Avengers/Justice League analogue are selfish, sadistic, masochistic, immature, jealous, and even rapacious.

Sure, you have the odd Starlight or Doctor Manhattan – individuals who wield actual power and choose to do good with it (or at the very least, to not commit atrocities with it) – but for the most part, heroes are like any other group of people: looking out for their own

self-interest in a world where that's the norm. And that's the best-case scenario in the worlds of these more skeptical and cynical postmodern superhero Texts.

This is all part of comics' role as interlocutors of cultural anxieties and realities. They play with and subvert traditional religious paradigms – like the notion of a savior – in order to hold a mirror up to those same paradigms.

Captain America's chief antagonist – the Nazi Johann Schmidt – goes by the name The Red Skull, and wears a demonic visage – that of a bare, crimson, skinless head with no features but exposed jaws and eyes. His daughter goes by the name “Sin,” short for Sinthea. The “Ultimate” imprint version of Red Skull is actually Rogers' illegitimate son who he never knew about, raised on a military base and studied like a lab rat until he breaks out, murders scores of soldiers and scientists, carves off his own face to spite his father, and becomes a mercenary anarchist. If a character has a name like “Red Skull,” it's a pretty good bet they're a bad guy. Yet, that same kind of infernal imagery is subverted by popular X-Men character Nightcrawler. His demonic prehensile tail, glowing pupil-less eyes, pointed ears, exposed canine teeth, and tridactyl feet and hands are juxtaposed against his devout Catholic faith and purity of heart (a skilled swordsman, he even leads a super-team called Excalibur).

Just as Nightcrawler subverts expectations of good and evil, so too does Lex Luthor hope to subvert the commonly held perception of Superman as a divine savior figure. In “Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice,” Jesse Eisenberg's Lex Luthor attempts to influence/intimidate a senator into funding his research into developing a weapon able to put down Superman. During a scene in which he welcomes the senator into his home, he refers to a painting – commissioned for the film and painted by Vance Kovacs – that depicts a pitched battle between the forces of Heaven and Hell – angels above versus demons below.

Superman, like the angels, comes from the sky like a Judeo-Christian angel or God; Batman (who Luthor intends to use as an unwitting pawn by fueling his distrustful, misanthropic rage) is a creature of the night and shadow, yet both have wings, suggesting a common ancestry. Another possible reading more aligned with Luthor's point of view: Demons humbly work in the shadows and caves of the earth like the smith god Hephestus, without seeking glory as the angels do. Another more self-aware Luthor reading: Demons and the Devil (the Prince of Lies) use deception in order to influence the world of men, as Luthor does to set the two heroes against one another. Another: With the villain Steppenwolf, the demons (in this case, Apokaliptian soldiers called parademons) come from above (a planet deep in space) during the climax of the film. However it's read, Luthor's take is that "Devils don't come from hell beneath us. They come from the sky."<sup>342</sup> Luthor means to imply that Superman is that devil from the sky, a false prophet clothed in angels' garb – an antichrist come to sap man of free will and agency.

Such interplay between the divine and the infernal is hardwired into comics. They are natural vehicles for religious themes, motifs, messages and questions. Wonder Woman is a daughter of the Amazons (created by Aphrodite) and she has been revealed as being (in more recent continuity) a demigod daughter of none other than Zeus. Many of Shazam's powers derive from the Greek pantheon. Members of various pantheons appear as superheroes themselves (i.e. Thor, Ares, and Hercules). In the CW television series *The Flash*, a bas-relief mural of seven Greco-Roman gods that adorns the inside of the Central City Police Department headquarters is meant to evoke the seven core members of the Justice League – Superman as Zeus (Jupiter), Batman as Hades (Pluto), Wonder Woman as Hera (Juno), the Flash as Hermes (Mercury), Green

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<sup>342</sup> *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Directed by Zack Snyder, Performance by Jesse Eisenberg, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016. 42:49.

Arrow as Apollo, Aquaman as Poseidon (Neptune), and the Green Lantern as Hephaestus (Vulcan).<sup>343</sup>

The implication that the Proppian Hero is actually a deceiver – the False Hero or the outright villain – is a staple of the Luthor character’s ethos, but it is also the expression of a rational fear: What if Superman is too good to be true? Ben Affleck’s Bruce Wayne certainly seems to think that, and it’s not an outlandish line of thinking. Skepticism, fear, and wariness of the powerful or unexplainable is hard-wired into the human psyche, and so it is with religion. In the Gospel of John 20:24-29, the apostle Thomas must actually touch Jesus’s crucifixion wounds in order to believe in the resurrection, hence his appellation as Doubting Thomas.

Luthor weaponizes such doubt to posit something unsettling and untrustworthy about the supernatural, clothed though it may be in the robes of beneficence. If there is even a 0.01% chance that this god amongst men could turn out to be a devil, then the cost of taking action is far outweighed by the cost of inaction.

In playing on the fear of the unknown, of the alien (the figurative, not the literal, though it is literal in this case), Luthor accesses anxieties that have been exploited by self-interested bad actors throughout the millennia, in culture after culture. Decades of Text tell us that Luthor is just one such bad actor arguing in bad faith. In Adventure Comics Vol. 2 #5, a secondary feature following Superboy Prime shows that Luthor’s own sister Lena is suffering from a debilitating disease. Luthor holds Lena hostage to convince Superboy to gather ingredients for a cure, which he does. Luthor injects his sister with it, allowing Lena to rise from her wheelchair to hug her daughter, but then Luthor injects her again, paralyzing his own sister once more. Infuriated,

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<sup>343</sup> Burlingame, Russ. “The Flash Production Designer Talks About His HUGE Justice League Easter Egg.” *ComicBook.com*, 30 Oct. 2014, <https://comicbook.com/news/the-flash-production-designer-talks-about-his-huge-justice-league/>.

Superboy throws Luthor against a wall, and Luthor calmly replies: “Lex giveth – and Lex taketh away.” In the next panel, Luthor tells Superboy: “I proved what I could do. And the secret stays with me until Superman is dead.”<sup>344</sup>

By concluding this episode with Lex glossing the words of God from Job 1:21, the writers not only show the depth of Lex’s hatred for Superman, but the profundity of his narcissism, which rises to the level of sacreligious self-veneration. While Luthor is clearly typed here as an antichrist figure, the underlying hum of doubt he places in the magnanimity and perceived divinity of superheroes persists.

While godlike in their abilities, they are by their very nature flawed and complex beings created by flawed and complex beings. Rather than sow distrust, though, those facts beg a deeper reading into the layers of meaning that the larger Superhero Text has acquired over the decades and centuries. Sometimes those readings build on one another, sometimes they’re tangential, and sometimes they’re contradictory; but that is part and parcel of what real, authentic literature – and folk art – *is*. It is difficult. It resists classification. It sparks arguments and debate. The true meaning of these heroic Texts is in how we – both as individual readers and as a larger society – negotiate those layers of meaning with each new generation.

In the 2009 Marvel one-shot entitled *Iron Man: Requiem*, writers David Michelinie and Matt Fraction explicitly explored this idea of multiple—and sometimes contradictory—takes on a character, in this case, Iron Man/Tony Stark. In the very first pages, Stark says, “I mean—I’m here and I’m in Afghanistan and I know this is where the Iron Man started because—because this is where it is and this is where I am. But when I think about it ... I’m not actually sure that I’m in Afghanistan. Am I sure? Am I certain? I mean ... I’m remembering all of this differently.

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<sup>344</sup> Johns, Geoff (w), Gates, Sterling (w), Jerry Ordway (p, i), Bob Wiacek (i). “Superboy: The Boy of Steel.” *Adventure Comics* #5 (Feb. 2010), DC Comics.



There's the logic of the situation—time, place, physical proof ... but my memories ... they're swearing all of this happened somewhere else..." In recent years, Stark's original origin, set in an East Asian jungle cave during the Vietnam War, had been shifted to the Middle East so as to update the character for a post-modern world that had witnessed the terrific toll of that war, was in the midst of another protracted military engagement with dubious motivations, and in place of clear-cut objective bad actors like Nazis or the Soviet Union, there were failed states engineered by and terrorist groups armed by the CIA in its various proxy actions to confound and oppose Soviet interests.<sup>345</sup>

During the 2020 multi-episode Arrowverse television adaptation of DC's Crisis on Infinite Earths storyline, two versions of Barry Allen – Grant Gustin from the CW Network's *The Flash*, and Ezra Miller from the DCEU's "Justice League" film – met on screen as Gustin's Flash traversed the multiverse. Zack Snyder, director of "Watchmen" (2012) and auteur behind the DCEU in the mid-2010s, spoke about different actors portraying the same characters simultaneously – yet in different media – during an interview on Big Talk Radio on Feb. 4, 2016 (emphasis mine):

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

As living expressions of the collective consciousness, these alternative origins and expressions of hero-saviors are how we work out our own anxieties, uncertainties, and existential quandaries. To paraphrase Walt Whitman again: Do they contradict themselves sometimes? Yes,

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<sup>345</sup> Stan Lee (w), David Michelinie (w), Matt Fraction (w), Larry Lieber (p), Joe Brozowski (p), John Romita Jr. (p), Kano (p), Tom Chu (c). *Iron Man: Requiem* #1 of 1 (Dec., 2009), Marvel Comics.

but that doesn't mean any single version has to be the only true version. They can all be true, from a certain point of view.<sup>346</sup>

Superhero narratives – both on the page and on the screen – are constantly engaged in quests for origin and searches for meaning or Truth (with a capital T). It is in this quest that the Texts are sliced open and the very idea of canon is questioned. That is precisely why there exist apocryphal texts that serve the Bible in the same way as modern films are served by deleted scenes, alternative cuts, and directors' commentary, some of which eventually force the adjustment or reconsideration of canon, and become canon themselves.<sup>347</sup>

When this manuscript was still a thesis, 15 years ago, much attention was being given to the apocryphal gospels than ever before, thanks to Dan Brown's bestseller The DaVinci Code and its movie adaptation. Suddenly, there was widespread interest in the "deleted scenes" of the

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<sup>346</sup> This is one of the few times I will reference one of my other great passions: Star Wars. While modern fandom has bent over backwards to explain contradictions between a trilogy that came out between 1977 and 1983, and a prequel trilogy that was released between 1999 and 2005, there has been some cinematic archaeology done to connect some dots. Namely: In "Episode IV: A New Hope," (1977) Alec Guinness's Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker that Darth Vader betrayed and murdered his father. Of course, that doesn't make sense given that "Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back" (1980) reveals that Vader *is* Luke's father.

Guinness's portrayal of Obi-Wan in the scene where he recounts Vader's origins was filled with enough ambiguity and hesitation that it allowed post-Empire readings of the scene to posit that he was speaking euphemistically to avoid alienating Luke, who he sees as the last remaining hope to defeat the Emperor.

In "Episode VI: Return of the Jedi," Obi-Wan addresses this obfuscation by saying that, "from a certain point of view," it was indeed Vader who killed Anakin Skywalker, a point of view that was fleshed out in the finale of the "Obi-Wan Kenobi" (2023) series on Disney+, where a wounded Vader (Hayden Christensen) taunts a guilty and remorseful Obi-Wan (Ewan McGregor) during their final duel before the start of the original trilogy: "You didn't kill Anakin Skywalker. *I* did." Kenobi replies: "Goodbye, Darth," acknowledging that at this moment, his friend – his spiritual brother – no longer exists. The boy who needed a father figure and lost him as soon as he found him – Qui-Gon Jinn – made do with a brother who only adopted him out of obligation. Inducted into an order that forbade romantic love, with no guide to help him navigate his complex emotions, he was vulnerable to the influence of Darth Sidious – the secret identity of Senator Palpatine. This father figure preyed on Anakin's doubt, uncertainty, and fear, sewing the seeds of a poisonous shadow that grew to consume the young Jedi. Yet, even until his final fall, his deepest motivation was to save his wife and child. His turn came from fear, yes, but fear that grew out of love.

Luke sees that if, as Obi-Wan says, Vader and Anakin are two separate entities – one of them a powerful Jedi, heroic warrior, and hopeful father – it stands to reason that Anakin may be strong enough to still exist somewhere inside Vader. Instead of being damned as he was for engaging in a romantic relationship forbidden to the Jedi – loving his wife Padmé – Anakin, Luke concludes, can be saved by a new Jedi's unconditional love.

<sup>347</sup> Estelhomme, Barry. "10 Deleted Scenes from Movies That Became Canon." *Collider.com*, 14 April 2023, <https://collider.com/movie-deleted-scenes-canon/>.

Christian Bible that depicted different early traditions' takes on Jesus, with alternative views on subjects such as his humanity, divinity, philosophy, and social relationships. These apocryphal gospels each performed or accessed some aspect of faith unique to the sects and traditions from whence they came.

At the same time, there emerged a trend of reinvention for comic book superheroes across all media: "Batman Begins" revived the Caped Crusader's viability on film with a back-to-basics origin story; "Superman Returns" attempted to re-start the Man of Steel's franchise by ignoring the lesser entries in his film series ("Superman III" and "Superman IV: The Quest for Peace"); the previous decade of Marvel films – produced by various third-party studios – was wiped away in favor of "Iron Man," which updated the locale of Tony Stark's confinement from Vietnam to Afghanistan; and "Smallville" was in the prime of its run. Despite its promise of no tights, no capes, no flights, the CW teen/young adult superhero drama was a hit in the ratings and lasted 10 seasons.

"Smallville" was emblematic of this larger quest for meaning in a world racked by change, from the financial crisis and its resultant recession to the agonizing demise of legacy media to a radical reconsideration of history in light of the new importance afforded to the narratives of marginalized communities. In the first decade of the 21st century, a decade heralded by an unthinkable act of terrorism, superheroes could no longer exist in a world of simple dichotomies, of lawful good versus chaotic evil. This was, of course, not new to comic books: Each comic Text – both on film and on the page – contains reboots and re-imaginings as creative teams and cultural sensibilities change. It's part of their nature as folk literature: One of the fundamental functions of folk literature is that it illuminates or illustrates some Truth about the world its culture inhabits.

Because many of our heroes' origins carried the marks of their times – the Depression, World War II, the turbulent 1960s, Vietnam – they needed new origin stories to fit with deeper and more complex motivations that could operate within the framework of a new understanding of the modern real world. Each new generation of creators has to start there – that's where they find the emotional throughlines and character arcs that resonate with their current moment, the 'whys' that will define a particular run. It's why you see writers like Ed Brubaker reach back to a character's origins for arcs like "The Winter Soldier," exploring the cracks and spaces left blank by their predecessors. It's the search for essential and original truth, a connection between the present and the past.

The Figure of Arthur—whether the man was real or fictional—is a part of England's past, and the stories that have come down through the centuries have been attempts at filling in the blanks as a way to know the unknowable past, just as the apocryphal gospels and the infancy gospels of Jesus attempt to fill in the ideological, historical, and biographical blanks in the Text of Jesus of Nazareth.

In fact, the series Superman For All Seasons echoes just such apocrypha. It is organized into four issues, each representing a season. Spring, the first issue, is narrated by Jonathan "Pa" Kent. He recalls spectacular deeds that Clark performed while growing up in Smallville, such as moving giant boulders from the farm fields and rescuing a man from a gas station about to explode during a tornado. The issue ends with Clark revealing his powers to Lana Lang—his high school crush—before going off to become Superman in Metropolis. This roughly parallels the Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter, which details events up to his death, just as in early versions of Superman's formative years, Jonathan Kent dies just before Clark leaves for Metropolis to become Superman.<sup>348</sup> The second issue—Summer—is written from the point of view of Lois

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<sup>348</sup>Al Plastino (a). "The Last Days of Ma and Pa Kent." Superman Vol. 1 #161 (May 1963), DC Comics.

Lane, the woman in love with a god. Instead of echoing the popular Gospel of Mary Magdalene, her narrative merely features her bearing witness to some of Superman's feats of strength. The real forbidden-love narrative comes in the fourth issue, narrated by Lana Lang, the boyhood crush Clark Kent left to become Superman in Metropolis. She knows that she cannot love him – cannot have him – because he belongs to the world. She knows his secret, which even Lois – in this world, at this point in Superman's history – does not know. Her secret knowledge is similar to that given to Mary Magdalene by Jesus in the apocryphal gospel (Mary 9:4).

The third story is told by Superman's greatest enemy: Lex Luthor. In it he rationalizes his hatred for Superman and the actions that arise from that hate. One would expect this to echo the Gospel of Judas, but it does not. Instead of making Luther a sympathetic character, as the Gospel of Judas does for its title character, it only serves to make him more dislikable, more loathsome.

The entire book speaks to a project of discovering who is behind the S: Clark Kent or Kal El? It is engaged in finding out who the Man of Steel was, is, and will be. In fact, it was a similar desire to discover the past of these superheroes—these pseudo-religious figures—that impelled *this* very project from the start—a search for a historical continuity, for a mechanism of historical transmission.

The later redactions of King Arthur, when he is fully equipped with the Round Table and Camelot, implicitly follow Stan Lee's famous axiom as the foundation for the unique Arthurian moral code: "People ask me where I came up with the line, 'With great power must also come great responsibility,' and I have no idea!"<sup>349</sup> It came implicitly and subconsciously from Arthur, an extension of the link forged around the idea of an Outsider Boy King, a composite role with which both the character of Arthur and Spider-Man identify.

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<sup>349</sup>Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 41:57.

The importance of the Outsider narrative tropes – evidence of the flawed and the human in the divine, and paradoxically finding divinity in those very flaws and humanity – has informed the vast majority of postmodern art centered on religion. The hit Broadway musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* is the final movement of the character of Jesus of Nazareth from real person to revered spiritual leader to worshiped dogma to aloof precept, and finally, to a reinterpretation, with the implicit question: How can any man deal with going to sleep at night being called the Messiah? This yearning to find the human in the superhuman is expressed lyrically in the play by the character of Mary Magdalene:

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

He scares me so.  
 I want him so.  
 I love him so.

The words of the song might as well be sung by Agent Peggy Carter, the paramour of Steve Rogers/Captain America, or by Lois Lane-Kent, Superman's wife. They too must negotiate a love for a flesh-and-blood man who has become a symbol, a messiah, when what makes them the object of affection is a contradictory mix of the ideal and the real. The exact same process has occurred with superheroes; perhaps they are not real people, but they start out as normal people (within the confines of their own universe) – the Skinny Steve of “Captain America: The First Avenger” – and then are given the opportunity to externalize their internal self. As Stanley Tucci's Dr. Erskine said in “Captain America: The First Avenger,” the super soldier serum (or insert your transformational event here) only reflects what's inside, and that's why Rogers was chosen.

In a behind-the-scenes featurette for “Captain America: The First Avenger,”<sup>350</sup> Chris Evans said that he insisted that it would be his face seen on film as, and his acting choices that informed the portrayal of pre-transformation Skinny Steve: “I think if you get to know who Steve Rogers is before he becomes Captain America, that's what will make for a good character.”

“He's a hero before he takes the Super Soldier Serum,” said the film's executive producer Louis D'Esposito in that same feature. “He's got courage, he's got values, he's got everything that you want in a superhero. He just doesn't have the size or the strength.”

In a Marvel One Shot (one of several short films that accompanied early Marvel home releases that filled in the gaps between major event movies) that accompanied “Iron Man 3,”

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<sup>350</sup> JoeBlo Superheroes. “Captain America (2011) Skinny Steve Rogers [HD] Chris Evans behind the Scenes.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 4 Aug. 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P-3KCeXpys](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P-3KCeXpys).

Hayley Atwell's Peggy Carter is seen to have kept a photo of Steve in her desk at the SSR, after Rogers had been lost but before the SSR became S.H.I.E.L.D. It isn't a photo of Steve as Cap. It's a photo of Skinny Steve. The same photo is seen framed on her desk as Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. in a time travel scene in "Avengers: Endgame."

"That's something that, when I read the [script], would be what makes the audience care about the relationship," Atwell later said. "And there's a hint of her – she still holds a flame for him. She still pines after him. And you get the sense that she loved that. She loved his spirit and his heart and his character, 'cause it wasn't just that he became a superhero and then she was attracted to him; it was something far more interesting."

He was a good man who didn't like bullies, no matter where they were from. The serum gave him the means to do something about it. In contrast, Kal El already had the powers, but it was Clark Kent losing his father that made him realize what he could do with them. In those pivotal moments – when Rogers transforms, when Clark Kent buries his father, when Hal Jordan overcomes great fear to take the Green Lantern ring, when Bruce Banner decides to sacrifice himself, when Diana leaves Themyscira, when Arthur draws the sword from the stone – that they become that ideal, that icon, that secular messiah. That moment of choice is what makes them timeless. It's what makes them simultaneously divine – for choosing the hard, selfless, often sacrificial path and overcoming fear – and human – *showing and acknowledging* that fear and vulnerability, and demonstrating that with one choice, like the song says, we can be heroes, if just for one day.

In our heroes, we seek to find the human element that is the source of their greatest powers. Superman goes up against Doomsday and dies, but is resurrected, and subsequently defeats Doomsday with intelligence and with his humanity.<sup>351</sup> It is Superman's humanity that is

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<sup>351</sup> Dan Jurgens (w, a) and Norm Rapmund(i). "Death." Superman: The Doomsday Wars #3 of 3 (1999), DC Comics.



his greatest asset, not his great power. While he may be called a god or godlike by characters on the page and on the screen, Superman is crucially *not* a god. Not even His nephew twice removed. The Donner films provide us with two lines that stress that point.

The first: “All those things I can do. All those powers. And I couldn't even save him.” Young Clark (Jeff East) says these words after the funeral of his adopted human father Jonathan Kent, a pivotal, formative moment in Superman’s story that has remained almost constant throughout his history. For all the wondrous abilities he has – speed, strength, flight, X-ray vision, super-intelligence, enhanced senses, freeze breath, and all the rest – he cannot control life or death, and cannot alter time, fate, or the hearts of others. His Kryptonian father dies because of the hubris of his people. His human father dies from a simple heart attack. These are very human deaths in every sense of the word – they show the frailty and fragility of all life, and they have impact and resonance. This is of vital importance, because it links Arthur together with his super-powered literary descendants and separates them from the divinely-inspired heroes who came before. While those heroes were created with explicit religious intent (Alexander’s PR campaign included), those of the Arthurian line acquired them organically, through the development of the Text.

Arthur started as a pagan folk hero, who may have benefitted from the gifts of the supernatural forces around him, but over time, he went from a simple military leader to a crusading knight and a seeker of the Holy Grail. By the time the Auchinleck was compiled, Robert de Boron had long since added the concept of the Holy Grail to Chretien de Troys’ unfinished *Perceval*, or *Le Conte del Graal*. Before Arthur and his knights pursued the Cup of Christ, it hadn’t gotten much publicity.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Richard O’Gorman. “Grail.” *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

But, while Arthur's story acquired that religious coloring over time, it also changed the way religion interacted with heroic texts. It was his humanity and his imperfections that allowed him to be a type of secular messiah – almost just touching the divine, but prohibited from fully attaining it. Because he and heroes like him are human (or mortal) – with flaws and faults – they risk great harm or damage to themselves in performing heroic deeds. That courage and selflessness is one of the fundamental tenets of heroism, and yes, even superheroism. Superman may be functionally immortal, but his heart and psyche are those of a normal man – he has loved ones, vulnerabilities, insecurities, and attachments that his foes often exploit. Wonder Woman, for all her great gifts, is vulnerable if she is in some way bound or restrained – certainly a strong metaphor for the diminution of women throughout world history – and yet, her greatest strengths are love and hope in spite of all she's seen and experienced. Those are very, very human traits, arguably the best we've got as a species, which brings us to the second quote from Donner's "Superman," courtesy of Marlon Brando's Jor-El: "They are a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason above all – their capacity for good – I have sent them you, my only son."

But what does that status as secular messiah *mean*? How does that shape the characters themselves, once they've acquired it?

Captain America was essentially resurrected by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as the leader of the Avengers. Like Arthur, who sailed off to Avalon to heal himself of his wounds, Rogers was thrown into the icy North Atlantic and frozen in suspended animation. When Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner found First Nation natives worshipping the frozen Captain as a mysterious god, he threw the block of ice into the water in a rage, allowing for an American submarine to find and retrieve it, releasing Rogers from his prison. The world needed him again in the era of the Cold

War and tensions in Vietnam. The king had to return. Crucially, though, Cap was depicted as damaged, as mourning, as uncomfortable, and as unsure at times. He had lost everyone he loves, and he failed to save his friend. He is very much a mortal man, not only in the fact that – unlike Superman or many of his contemporaries – he’s not bullet-proof, but he invites the reader to slice open the Text and project their own trauma onto him. It is that Textual and psychological vulnerability that enable him to become a secular messiah each time he’s thought dead and gone, and then brought back in his true form to save the world, from his first Avengers cover to the Secret Empire Hydra-Cap storyline.

C.J. Mackie, in the essay, *Men of Darkness*, compares and contrasts an Achilles/Odysseus dialectic with Superman/Batman. He asserts that both of the earlier heroes in each pairing – Achilles and Superman – are representative of a “pattern (that) seems to exist in which (super)heroism moves from the transcendental to the human, from the almost invulnerable, otherworldly kind of figure, to the very human man of darkness and courage” (Mackie, 84).<sup>353</sup> However well that assertion may work on the micro level, of earlier-to-later within a certain milieu, it also works on a larger time scale, one which Mackie does not discuss. While Superman may be invulnerable, *per se*, he does have weaknesses.

In the All-Star Superman series, Superman flies through the sun to save a research vessel trapped inside. Since the sun is the source of Superman’s powers within our solar system (his Kryptonian physiology absorbs solar radiation like Earth-bound plants), his trip through it essentially overloads his cells, and they begin to die. The rest of the series is concerned with how a dying Superman spends his final time on earth. It makes him very mortal. While he is very literally otherworldly, as Byrne’s thought bubbles at the end of Man of Steel #4 say, it is the

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<sup>353</sup> Mackie, C.J. “Men of Darkness.” Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman. Ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndaliansis, Chris Mackie. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007.

Earth, and America that make Superman who he is. His powers may come from beyond our world, but it is his humanity and his sense of justice that make him a hero beyond the ancient heroes of old who were descended from the gods themselves.

The heroes that Captain America led into the fires of Marvel's Civil War saw that same quality in Steve Rogers. It was his dedication and patriotism that shone through his scrawny exterior that allowed him to become Project Rebirth's only participant, and that love of the idyllic America, of real justice, of real freedom, of the abstract concepts upon which our nation is purported to stand, that earned him the respect of characters on both sides of the conflict. Steve Rogers was not respected by his fellow characters and by fans just because he wore the flag. He earned it because he wore it well. He wore it like it should be worn—with pride, dignity, humility, and compassion. Not just anyone can “wear the flag.”

The very idea of Rogers—of Captain America—impels Tony Stark to pull his punches when facing Rogers' old sidekick, James “Bucky” Barnes, aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. Barnes is a threat to Stark because he holds Stark responsible for Rogers' death, and yet, because of the years when Stark and Rogers were the best of friends, and out of respect for that friendship and Rogers' noble carriage even in defeat, Stark cannot bring himself to hurt Bucky, because in Rogers' last will and testament, he told Stark to “save Bucky.”<sup>354</sup> Stark implores Barnes: “Don't do this,” to which an enraged Barnes replies, “Why don't you shove it.” Later in the fight, Stark says, “You're good, Bucky, and quick on your feet in a fight. I'm glad to see that. But if you even flinch, I'm going to liquefy your brain right in your head. And I really don't want to do that.” Bucky asks, “Why the hell not?” Stark replies, “Because I'm trying to honor the last wishes of a friend. That's why I brought you here, because Steve Rogers asked me to save you ... from

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<sup>354</sup> Ed Brubaker (w) and Steve Epting (a). “The Burden of Dreams: Part 3.” Captain America Vol. 4 #33 (Dec. 2007), Marvel Comics.

yourself.” He goes on to say, after informing Barnes of Rogers’ will, that “Steve would never forgive us if we killed each other, would he?”<sup>355</sup>

Just the same, Arthur was just a man, with no inherent superpowers. He was a boy, who gained no respect automatically, as a grown man may have. He earned it through battle and through fair dealings. He was honorable and just. He was a good man. That is what we seem to look for in our superheroes—that they be good people, but people above all; flawed people, sympathetic people, struggling people, but people who can rise up, even from the clutches of death itself, and save us.

The signs – these traces – of an uninterrupted narrative that I’ve cataloged here suggest that these two ostensibly separate Texts—that of Arthuriana and that of comic book superheroes—are more than simply of-a-kind. In light of their shared Proppian spheres, folkloric roots, kingship roles, their fulfillments of MPIC conventions, and their negotiation of religion, these traces demonstrate that these two Texts are connected through a wider consciousness of what has come before, and the shared awareness that the tellers of these stories are part of a creative tradition that stretches from the towers of Metropolis back to the untamed wilds of Britannia.

The Celtic oral lore about the once and future king has historically been read into several men whose names can be read as some formulation of the name Arthur. In the Auchinleck, the idea of a once and future king can be seen as the culmination of kingship narratives in the central Arthur tale, and the fact that all three kings share a number of roles that link their Textual presences together. This can be viewed – retrospectively – as a single figure coming back over

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<sup>355</sup> The full text of Rogers’ letter from *The Death of Captain America*, Vol. 1: “Tony—If you’re reading this, and the worst is to happen, I’m trusting you to do two things: Don’t let Bucky drift back into anger and confusion. He has a chance at a new life—help him find his way. Save him for me. And as for Captain America, the part of it that is bigger than me—that’s always been bigger than me—don’t let it die, Tony. America needs a Captain, maybe now more than ever. Don’t let that dream die. Yours, Steve Rogers.”

and over again to aid the people of the world in their time of need. He is the Once and Future King precisely because he crops up as so many different people. He is never that one single soldier, sitting atop Badon Hill on his white steed, carrying the pennant of the royal Pendragon. He is not a singular man, but a heroic spirit who comes back over and over again, taking the form of different heroes each and every time.

In the comic book Heroes for Hire # 2, the character Dane Whitman (who eventually becomes the superhero known as the Black Knight) is brought to the Isle of Avalon by the Lady of the Lake, who shows him the tomb of King Arthur, explaining that his prophesied return was never meant to be an actual resurrection. Rather, a new champion would be chosen to take Arthur's place as "the Pendragon."

The Lady says to Whitman: "Legend tells that Arthur was brought here to be healed of his wounds, to return when needed. For some wounds, however, the best and only healing is death. Behold the TOMB of King Arthur, Lord of the Britons—Arthur PENDRAGON."

Whitman responds: "But, how can Arthur be DEAD if he is to come again?!" The Lady answers that "those who told you the tale mistold a part of it. T'was never said that ARTHUR would return but that the PENDRAGON would arise anew at need. Each age has its OWN Pendragon ... The mortal lands need a new Pendragon, one to champion and inspire them."<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Jeff Christianson. "Recent King Arthur Conflicts." Marvel Universe App. 10 June 2010  
<<http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix2/arthurpendragon.htm>>.

***Chapter 24: Are You the Man Who Can Lead Us Once Again?***  
**Of Loss, Death, and Resurrections of Heroes**

We run for our lives  
 And we're searching for shelter now  
 From the coming storm (Yeah)  
 Are you the man who can lead us once again  
 So come on, suit up, let's go

(Where there's love  
 There is grace)  
 And there's hope left in this place  
 (And the smile on your face)  
 There's not a damn thing we can't face

**– Styx, *Captain America***

Sharon Cameron's article<sup>357</sup> on Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Experience*, deals with a theory of loss suggestive of the way that comic books deal with the loss of superheroes. In particular, it echoes the song by the Canadian group, the Crash Test Dummies, called "Superman's Song."

Emerson mentions the death of his son only in the first few pages of his essay, while the song obliquely references the hypothetical death of Superman only in its first verse: "Clark Kent, now there was a real gent." The song is implicitly about the death of Superman (interestingly enough, two years before it occurred in the comics), and appropriately, its music video is set at a funeral with aging superheroes in attendance. It is a eulogy and seems to acknowledge itself as such in the opening lines, however throughout the rest of the song, there is no mention of the death of the Man of Steel, save for the use of the past tense in the chorus: "Superman never made

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<sup>357</sup> Cameron, Sharon. "Representing Grief: Emerson's "Experience."" *Representations*, No. 15 (Summer, 1986), pp. 15-41.

any money / saving the world from Solomon Grundy / And sometimes I despair the world will never see a man like him."

Similarly, though inspired by the death of Emerson's son Waldo, the essay mentions the occurrence only once. It is a lament, but the object of lament is ineffable, in the same way as the death of Superman, for the Crash Test Dummies, cannot be said outright, but rather must be approached from different angles until we finally get the picture that Superman has in fact died and that the song is a dirge.

We don't realize how death affects us until it occurs, and then, we cannot really put it into words save for the negative sensations—the feeling of what is not there, as Emerson does. Emerson says that “this calamity ... does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar.” This fits perfectly with the tendency of some of the greatest heroes (Captain America, Superman) to die, leaving tremendous emptiness and confusion in the hearts and minds of the world they protected. It is not the pain of loss, but rather the emptiness that is most prominent. But that emptiness serves a purpose, for we know that – sooner or later – a new hero will rise, or the old one will return renewed. For these characters, death is only a momentary inconvenience, a new chance at life. But when that hole, that emptiness is not immediately filled, or when it is inadequately filled, only then do readers of heroic literature experience what Emerson did—a feeling of missing, of incomplete being.

And, no matter how many times we try, like Emerson, to quantify that or to put the loss and grief into words, we run into the same problems that he did—the inability to express that feeling of loss. We refer back to the hero's career and accomplishments, and only in retrospect do we see the effect they had on their worlds both on the page and off of it.



Similarly, for King Arthur to become the hero, Malory's "once and future king," he had to die. The world could not do with an immortal savior. In the Battle of Camlann, Arthur falls as he simultaneously strikes a fatal blow with Excalibur to his mortal enemy/shadow self/illegitimate son/usurper Mordred. In a tradition that starts in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the English Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, a dying Arthur exhorts his trusted friend and knight Bedivere to cast the great blade Excalibur into the waters from whence it came.<sup>358</sup> Echoing St. Peter's three denials of Christ, Bedivere goes three times to the lake, but each time cannot bear to discard the sword. Finally, after being rebuked by Arthur, Bedivere casts Excalibur into the water, leaving it there for when it shall be needed again.<sup>359</sup> For a great king who came into existence because of the records of the great battles he fought, there could not be a more fitting end.

Just like their literary ancestor, comic book superheroes, too, prove to be all-too-mortal in their ends. Their continuation of the good fight, of Superman's "never-ending battle" is a direct mirror of Arthur's combative exploits, and their deaths in the midst of those conflicts very much mirror Arthur's. Just as Arthur perishes eliminating his greatest threat—a threat to his life, to his kingdom, his legacy, and his ideals—so do comic book superheroes die resisting Earth's greatest threats.

In 1985's Crisis on Infinite Earths # 8, Barry Allen—the police criminologist who became the second Flash—runs himself to death destroying the Anti-Monitor's main weapon aimed at destroying the DC Universe. Allen was later succeeded as the Scarlet Speedster by the former Kid Flash – the impetuous yet lovable Wally West – who took up the mantle and his predecessor's place as a member of the Justice League of America. While the Arthurian canon gestures at a return of the king, the return of the Flash was an example of that promise made

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<sup>358</sup> Raymond H. Thompson. "Bedivere." New Arthurian Encyclopedia, 1991.

<sup>359</sup> Norris J. Lacy. "Excalibur." New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

manifest. The deaths of superheroes – however minor or major – mirror the death and promised resurrection of Arthur, and their impact is felt far beyond the page. They echo across popular culture.

As comic book writer and DC historian Mark Waid said in the History Channel feature, *Look, Up in the Sky! The Story of Superman*, “Nothing else happened in the world the day the Death of Superman comic hit the newsstands.”<sup>360</sup> When the Last Son of Krypton, in order to defend Metropolis from the rampaging Kryptonian monster known as Doomsday, struck one mighty punch to seemingly defeat the hulking behemoth, he too expired, in a near-perfect echo of Arthur’s final moments. The entire story arc and its promotion were based on a lie, which the entire comic-reading world, and even the general public bought, hook, line, and sinker.

Many echoed the sentiments of Chuck Rozanski, a comic book industry leader and founder of Mile High Comics in Denver, one of the largest retail comic book dealers in the United States. In a phone call to then-DC President Paul Levitz, Rozanski argued that “since Superman was such a recognized icon within America’s overall popular culture ... DC had no more right to “kill” him than Disney had the right to “kill” Mickey Mouse ... in my opinion, DC didn’t actually “own” Superman, but rather was a trustee of a sacred national image.”<sup>361</sup>

Superman perished defeating a creature who originated from his own homeworld, as Doomsday was later revealed to be an experiment performed by early Kryptonian scientists at a time when the planet Krypton was the most hostile planet in the universe. Doomsday was a living weapon, designed to withstand the harsh and savage creatures of primordial Krypton’s wilderness. Like Arthur and Mordred, Superman and Doomsday shared a history, blood, and even rudimentary DNA. While Superman gained his powers because of Earth’s yellow sun (the

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<sup>360</sup> *Look, Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, 1:17:18.

<sup>361</sup> Rozanski, Chuck. ““Death of Superman” Promotion of 1992.” *Mile High Comics*. Mile High Comics. 10 April 2008 <<http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg127.html>>.

source of life), Doomsday gained his strength literally from death. A shorthand explanation of the evolution of Doomsday is that Kryptonian infants were repeatedly exposed to the harsh Kryptonian environs in order to create the perfect warrior.<sup>362</sup>

DC introduced four replacement “Supermen,” each claiming some legitimacy as Superman’s successor or even to be Superman himself. Though the truth eventually came out, and the true Superman did make a triumphant return in order to defeat the usurper Cyborg Superman with the aid of the three other Supermen, the storyline struck a nerve in the consciousness of all who treasured the Big Blue Boy Scout around the world.

In All-Star Superman, the idea of the death of the Man of Steel was raised yet again, this time framing the story with Superman’s knowledge that he would eventually die, and as tasked with accomplishing 12 Herculean labors before he shuffled off of his slightly-more-than-mortal coil. One of those tasks is to create life. Not being able to mate with Lois Lane because of his alien biology, he finds a small pocket Universe, just beginning to sprout, and nurtures it in the Fortress of Solitude. Superman wants to be secure in the knowledge that when he is gone, the world will be able to function without him, and that people will have learned from his example. Throughout the end of All-Star Superman #10, we see glimpses of this Universe evolving. Interspersed with frames that have to do with the plot, we see the first cave paintings of Aboriginal peoples. Then we see a man working on the carving of an Indo-European goddess amongst a forest of temples. Next we see Sophocles debating the role of the philosopher king:

“Let us not yield sovereignty even to them, the highest of the angelic hierarchies! Become instead like them in all their glory and dignity. Imitation is man’s nature and if he but wills it, so shall he surpass even imagination’s greatest paragons.”

The next scene we see of this so-called Earth Q is a mustachioed man hunched over in work, writing the words, “Behold, I teach you the Superman.” It is Nietzsche, writing his tract on

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<sup>362</sup> Robert Greenberger. “Doomsday.” The DC Comics Encyclopedia, 2004.

the *Urbemensch*. The final page shows a building in Cleveland, with a speech bubble coming anonymously out of one of the windows:

“I really think this is it ... Third time lucky. This is the one ... This is going to change everything.”

And with the last lines, the frame shows a fingered pencil, just finishing the outline of a man in a cape, with a big S shield stretched across his chest. The point being: In a world without Superman, we will create one. And, just so, it matters not whether or not King Arthur was a real person (or persons); we would have conjured him, all the same. Why? Why do we bring forth these superheroes, over and over again? Because we *need* that hero, that Superman or that King Arthur. We need something – someone – to believe in, someone who represents the best of what we can be, to be that light to show us the way.

Just as Superman grapples with his own mortality in All-Star Superman, so too do we grapple with our own, and our hope in the resurrection and return of our heroes is a manifestation of that – that something of us, somehow, will live on and survive. If we can’t live forever, then maybe our heroes can transcend it.

We live in a world without Superman. We look around everyday and see war, famine, terrorism, death, disease, violence, hatred, and division, and we feel powerless. While it may seem like the world cries out for a Superman or a King Arthur to save us, what those figures represent is our potential to save ourselves. We aren’t entitled to salvation, but if we believe hard enough, it’s within our grasp. As Gal Gadot’s Wonder Woman says in her eponymous 2017 film: “It’s not about what we deserve. It’s about what we believe.” We don’t need a Superman to save us, but the *image* of Superman, the *Figure* of King Arthur. They give us the star to shoot for, so that maybe – as Superman wishes in the final pages of All-Star Superman #10 – we can learn to be our own Superman.

This concept of becoming our superheroes lives in the array of apparel produced with the Kryptonian S stretched across it—sweatshirts, t-shirts, belt buckles, and more—and in the attitudes of everyday heroes, like the relief worker cleaning up an oil spill on the shores of Spain who drew a crude Superman S on his chest with the same insidious, toxic substance he was working to clean.<sup>363</sup> Our superheroes provide for us not a template for action, for their abilities, like the magical abilities of Excalibur, are not real. What they provide for us is that same moral code and ethical guide that King Arthur bequeathed to them.

The big blow of Steve Rogers' death at the end of Civil War was that he was the conscience of the Marvel Universe. He didn't just wear the flag. He wore it well. For him, the moment that Franklin Roosevelt gave him his round shield is equivalent to the moment that Arthur pulled the sword from the stone to become the one true king. Rather than dying in a battle of succession, as Arthur did, Cap dies protecting his jailors. He was imprisoned because he gave up fighting for fear he would injure innocents. He gave up his protest because he realized it wasn't what the people wanted. He could not force them to see things his way, nor did he want to. Even in defeat, he was noble. He fought for ideals, not policy.

So, when Iron Man asks Clint Barton to take over the mantle, and Hawkeye takes the shield for a spin, it is no wonder that even though the archer and Cap bumped heads and traded barbs many times, Barton still respects what Rogers stood for. Like Stark, he often served as the Lancelot to Cap's Arthur. In fact, when Barton is trying out the shield, he tells Stark that "it's like diddling with your best friend's wife." In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Sebastian Stan's Bucky knows that he's not fit to take up the shield: He was a former HYDRA assassin, a man with blood on his hands who would never be able to earn the public trust as his friend did. In fact, when an elderly Steve returns from his quest to replace the Infinity Stones at the end of

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<sup>363</sup> <http://www.supermanhomepage.com/images/news-images/spanish-oil-tb.html>

“Avengers: Endgame” (2019), Bucky shows a satisfactory smile when he spots an elderly Steve waiting to hand the shield to Sam Wilson, and urges Sam on. Both when Mackie’s Sam and the comics’ Bucky take up Steve Rogers’ shield, they explicitly acknowledge that he can never *be* Steve. There is a feeling of emptiness and loss, but yet also one of guarded hope and optimism – no, they cannot be Captain America in the way Steve was Captain America, but they can still be a hero that honors what he stood for.

Death is an important part of the experience of life, and though it can never be felt in the realm of positive sensations – “I feel this way or that way” – it is felt in the negative or emptiness left by the hero, the “world without.” So, what can readers of heroic literature learn from Emerson’s *Experience*? We don’t know what we have until it is gone. The only thing we can try to do is to move on.

In the fall of 1992, Saturday morning cartoons took up the thread of the Once and Future King with *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice*. The premise: The real King Arthur and his knights are trapped in suspended animation in the Cave of Glass by the evil enchantress Morgana, Arthur’s sister. Unable to free them without the 12 Keys of Truth, Merlin searches the timeline for capable replacements, landing on a fictional football team: The New York Knights, led by quarterback Arthur King.

King and his Knights take on all the modern trappings of superheroes: They pledge “fairness to all, to protect the weak and vanquish the evil,” as their mission. Merlin furnishes them with magical weapons and armor, which appear on their persons when they speak the oath and the roof of the Table room opens, inviting each of their mystical totem spirits to enter. These stylized armors each bear a chevron unique to each knight: Arthur’s golden armor is decorated with a silver Excalibur on his chest, which mystically manifests into his hand when called, and

they all bear images of their magical totem creatures on their shields which manifest when called upon, including the Dragon of Justice on Arthur's shield. Their armor conceals their true faces and their real identities are unknown to all but Merlin. Though the series ended abruptly after two seasons with no resolution, it bore the clear MPIC hallmarks of a superhero work, and dealt with a somewhat unconventional expression of the return of Arthur, whereby an unlikely spiritual successor is elevated to the level of the lost hero after being thrust into taking the mantle out of necessity. King does not intentionally seek out power and responsibility, but rather rises to the occasion and grows into the crown and fights for truth, justice, and a better world. Sound familiar?

At the turn of the 20th century, 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," the very time period where we see the first seeds of the superheroic being sewn: Hawthorne had just written his *Gray Champion*; Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel were putting on their masks. And then, out of the blue, came a King.<sup>364</sup> Except the royal Pendragon had coiled itself into an S, a symbol that has come to stand as the Kryptonian glyph for "hope."<sup>365</sup>

It is the thematic and spiritual resurrection of the Arthurian in the modern comic book – not just the various resurrections of the heroes themselves – that is paramount here. It is the idea, the concept, the practices, and the ephemera that are resurrected – the way the heroic stories are

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<sup>364</sup> Stephen R. Reimer and Raymond H. Thompson. "Legend of Arthur's Return." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

<sup>365</sup> 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 Byrne's run on *Man of Steel*, it was said to be 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. 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."

told, even down to the very modes of production. We are remembering what our heroes meant to us and how – and why – we told their stories. The parallels and resemblances I’ve outlined exist, “be they conscious or unconscious responses to antiquity,” (Mackie, 83) because our modern superheroes are reincarnations of the Figure of Arthur.

The superheroes who first appeared in the 1930s were not gods or demigods. They were human(ish). They were frail – if not physically, then emotionally and psychologically. They had vulnerabilities. They were imperfect. And yet, they defied. They battled. They resisted the forces of fascism, evil, fate, despair, and resignation. They lived in our world – for better or for worse – and, like Arthur, they were reflections of us.



***Chapter 25: I Am Superman, and I Can Do Anything***  
**The Transcendence of Christopher Reeve**

I am (I am), I am Superman  
 And I can do anything.

**–The Academy Is, *Superman***

Billionaire industrialist, playboy, and weapons manufacturer Tony Stark – who, in his guise as the armored Iron Man, is the closest modern heroes get to a medieval knight (aesthetically speaking) – had long been characterized by his excess. Both on page and on film, he lived a glamorous lifestyle – hot rod cars, private jets, a string of beautiful female conquests – but he has also dealt with the fallout from his double life. In “Iron Man 3” (2013), Downey Jr.’s Stark is haunted by crippling panic attacks and PTSD stemming from the Battle of New York. It is this trauma that informs his desperate desire to create a “suit of armor around the world” in “Avengers: Age of Ultron” (2015), a desire which leads to the creation of the genocidal artificial intelligence Ultron. All of this was made possible by the “Demon in the Bottle” storyline in 1978 – one of the most consequential story arcs in Marvel history in which Iron Man confronts the reality that his alcoholism makes him dangerous to himself and others. He’s a drunk behind the wheel of a multi-million-dollar car with WMD-level destructive power.

During pre-production for the very first “Iron Man” film, director Jon Favreau had trouble securing insurance to cast the notoriously-troubled Robert Downey Jr. as Stark because of his lengthy history of substance abuse, yet when Downey was announced to be playing the billionaire playboy/future alcoholic, fans of the character rejoiced. Their faith was rewarded, as Downey accessed his own demons to give his interpretation of Tony Stark emotional depth and an authentic pathos. When he was cast, Downey was radioactive; he had just spent a year in

prison thanks to drug and gun charges, was fired from a role on “Ally McBeal,” and was in court-ordered rehab, relying on friends to cast him in parts just to keep food on the table. Sober since 2003, Downey used his past for the role, layering that constant pressure of the threat of a relapse behind the delivery of his lines as he not only resurrected his career, but found inner peace and personal redemption. The role spurred a renaissance for Downey, who is widely recognized as one of the greatest actors of this generation. He has achieved not only unheard-of financial success, but true creative fulfillment in projects big and small, earning his first Academy Award. He won the Oscar not for portraying the main center of attention – the star – but Sen. Lewis Strauss, a conniving, backhanded, cowardly foil for the titular physicist in “Oppenheimer” (2023).

Downey, of course, was not the first actor to truly inhabit a superhero role, nor will he be the last. Hugh Jackman’s ferocious approach to training and his deep care for character work have made his Wolverine a nigh-impossible act to follow (hence why he put the claws and mutton chops back on for “Deadpool & Wolverine” in 2024). After commanding the bridge of the Enterprise-D in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Sir Patrick Stewart found his second act in Professor Charles Xavier’s wheelchair – a role that the smooth-pated, classically-trained thespian was seemingly born to play.

Downey’s own fellow Avenger, Chris Evans, has likewise become inextricably linked to the character for his earnest, nuanced, and heartfelt portrayal of the pure-hearted, time-displaced super soldier. Unlike each of the men above, though, Evans became a real-world avatar for all that Steve Rogers represents. Few have earned membership to that club. Appropriately enough, its charter member likewise portrayed the Arthurian moral center of his comic book universe.

Christopher Reeve played Superman over the course of four films, and came to represent the character for an entire generation. He so deeply inhabited the role while filming that, during rehearsal for a flying scene with Margot Kidder (Lois Lane), when a wire connecting their rig to the flying mechanism overhead snapped, he reached out and grabbed hold of a nearby metal rod, as if he – like the physics-defying Kryptonian he played – could keep them from falling, single handedly. Safety features prevented an actual fall, but the crew saw it as a sign: This Julliard-trained serious Actor was giving his all to *become* Superman.

He embodied the film's tagline: You Will Believe a Man Can Fly. And he soared. But, as the snake biting an unnamed mounted knight touched off King Arthur's final battle at Camlann, so did Reeve meet his own misfortune on horseback. In May of 1995, Reeve suffered a riding accident during an equestrian event, becoming paralyzed from the neck down when he was thrown from his mount.<sup>366</sup> That didn't stop him from *being* Superman.

Once he had his accident, he became a tireless promoter for spinal injury research, including stem cell research. His fundraising doubtless saved many lives, and improved the quality of life for people across the globe. His appearance on Season 2 of the television show *Smallville* was in effect a passing of the torch to the new Clark Kent, Tom Welling. Despite being bound to a wheelchair after being known for portraying the strongest man on Earth, his mere appearance on the show skyrocketed ratings, and served as a *de facto* blessing on the enterprise. In all, the foundation has raised tens of millions of dollars for spinal cord injury research. "He wasn't here just to be an actor," said Donner. "He *was* Superman."<sup>367</sup>

The vast collection of editorial cartoons from just after Reeve passed away say more than I ever could about what his death meant for the public. One showed Captain America,

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<sup>366</sup> Romano, Lois. "Riding Accident Paralyzes Actor Christopher Reeve." *Washington Post*, June 1, 1995. pp. A1. 19 Nov. 2006.

<sup>367</sup> Look Up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman, 1:34:12.

Spiderman, and Batman, looking down on the fresh grave of Reeve, with Batman exclaiming, “He really was a Superman...” A cartoon by Bill Schorr of United Media showed Superman, holding a *Daily Planet*, the headline of which reads “Christopher Reeve Dies,” and below the Man of Steel, in quotes: “He was my hero...” In the *Charlotte Observer*, Kevin Siers drew a motorized wheelchair in an open phone booth, one of the iconic places where Clark Kent makes his signature transformation into the Last Son of Krypton. The white caption on the black background: “Up, up and away,” one of the phrases commonly associated with Superman. In *USA Today*, a silhouetted wheelchair sits empty, as a small caped figure flies away in the distance.

A cartoon by Marshall Ramsey of the *Clarion Ledger* in Jackson, Miss., showed a black and white tableau, with the empty wheelchair, and a lone colored red and blue figure flying out of the seat, already fading into the distance. But perhaps the most touching of all was one by Glenn McCoy, depicting a cloud bank, with an empty wheelchair in the background. In the foreground was Reeve as Superman, chatting with St. Peter. Reeve’s left hand is held up in a dismissing gesture, as he says, “Keep the wings.” For millions of fans across the globe, Superman himself had died. Apart from the actual work of portraying Superman, it was Reeve who gave them all hope. Perhaps he was born to put on that red S and show the world that a man really could fly, even if he couldn’t walk.

Stuart Laird, the editor of the first Superman film, said when asked about Reeve:

“Chris believed. It wasn’t just a performance. He believed he was Superman. He lived it and he realized what a wonderful opportunity it was for him. He didn’t take it slightly. He didn’t have any embarrassment about it. It became more than just a part. Like Sean Connery became James Bond and always will be.”<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> You Will Believe, “The Heart of a Hero: A Tribute to Christopher Reeve.” 28:17.

During the years that Reeve spent raising money and awareness for spinal cord injury research, it was not a real Superman swooping in to save the world, but a man in a wheelchair armed with an idea, a notion, a myth, and the face of our greatest hero. Even though he could not walk, he embodied the tagline of the film that changed his life: “You Will Believe a Man Can Fly.”

In light of this treatment of Reeve’s death, let’s take one more look at how comic book superheroes reacted in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center. In the first pages of Captain America Vol. 4 #1<sup>369</sup>, we see a lone figure struggling with the rubble at Ground Zero, lifting whatever he can to rescue whatever survivors there might be. A close-up on the inside of his forearm shows ‘Steve Rogers’ written in marker as part of the rescue effort. Another rescue worker tells Rogers, “You have to sleep.” Rogers responds, “I slept yesterday.”

In a 9-11 tribute comic, DC artists depicted Superman—the most powerful hero in the world—standing, with his dog Krypto by his side, staring up in awe at a billboard, which shows firemen, doctors, nurses, and police officers larger than life. With one word, Superman shows that in the face of the real heroes of Sept. 11, he is humbled. The only word in the speech bubble is, “Wow.”

DC wasn’t the only company to utilize the single-word frame. In Amazing Spider-Man #36, as New York burns to ashes around him after the towers topple down, Spider-Man is shown perched atop a nearby roof, body twisted and hands grasping his head in anguish. As he gazes at the fiery crucible that had been the World Trade Center, he speaks only one word: “...God...” The cover of that issue was entirely black, save for the white masthead. It was the comic world’s black armband.

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<sup>369</sup> John Ney Rieber (w) and John Cassaday (a). “Loss of Innocence.” Captain America Vol. 4 #1 (Jun. 2002), Marvel Comics.

Another piece of art showed the smoking New York City skyline in haunting pastels, with a shadowy figure of Captain America set against the sky, shield held limp at his side, and right hand covering his face and the tracks of his tears.

In an Alex Ross piece from JLA: Secret Origins (2002), a silhouetted Superman is straining to hold up a falling piece of presumably World Trade Center rubble. We cannot see the famous S shield, but we see the flash of red at the base of his cape, and the Kryptonian forelock on his forehead. We know it's Superman, without even having to see his chest.

But it was not only Sept. 11 that elicited such an emotional superhero response. Other disasters carry the mark of superheroes as well, including an oil spill in Spain. One of the cleanup workers was famously photographed in his all-white jumpsuit, with the putrid crude used to draw a symbol on his chest in stark relief—Superman's S shield. Superheroes express the feelings of a society, and sometimes of a world. And they also give us strength, it seems, to right grievous wrongs, and sometimes save a little corner of the world.

Reeve played Superman in four major motion pictures. His paralysis shocked the world, and not just those who read comic books. He was a man who was seen as not just an actor playing Superman, but a real Man of Steel. He became as iconic as the S shield he wore on his chest. After his horse riding accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down, he became a tireless advocate for spinal cord research, determined to ensure that one day, he—and other paraplegics—would walk again. On the official website for the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, there is a donation tab labeled: “Be a Superhero,” exhorting all who visit to be a Superman of their very own.

Why do we keep bringing heroes back? Why do superheroes come back from the dead? Why did those storytellers of old place Arthur on the raft to heal his wounds on Avalon? Because they give us hope, even in our darkest hours.

## ***Chapter 26: They Still Live On***

### **Our Heroes – Past, Present, and Future – Live In Us: A Conclusion, and a Beginning**

“They’re inside of me, they still live on.”

#### **–Shinedown, *Heroes***

As Lois Lane looks up from her front yard at the hovering god above her, she asks, “I ... will we see you ... around?” Superman looks down, and smiles. “I’m always around. Goodnight, Lois.”

A touching end to the concluding scene of 2006’s “Superman Returns.” But in light of this project, it takes on much greater significance than just a goodbye. The film was not critically acclaimed, and it failed to reinvigorate the franchise. But, as is my wont it seems with tepidly-reviewed hero movies (i.e. “King Arthur,” 2004), I have found a redeeming gem. Despite its perceived shortcomings as a film, the movie’s concluding lines say perhaps all we need to know about our heroes, and on a more personal note, the very reason I was compelled to author this work. It slices open the pages (or celluloid) of the heroic and superheroic texts to offer perhaps a glimpse into why this resurrection of the Arthurian has happened, why the legend of King Arthur—or Lucius Artorius Castus or Ambrosius Aurelianus or whoever he really was—forged in the dying embers of the Roman Empire, has been resurrected by men in tights who wear their underwear on the outside.

The reception of Reeve’s death and the reaction of the general public to the events of Sept. 11 show many things about the role of heroes in modern American society. But, the question may be asked: Where is King Arthur in all of this? I return to the same answer that I have given whenever I am asked about this thesis, and the same answer Superman gives to Lois:



He's always around. For me, that is the simplest answer to perhaps the most complex question: Why? Arthur and Superman and Hercules and Captain America—they have always been around. We are only just beginning to sit up and take notice, as the publication dates on many of my academic references illuminate. Only in the past 20 or so years have we been looking seriously at comic books as a form of literature at best, and at the very least as a valid field of academic inquiry. We are only starting to realize that these heroes have indeed, always been around.

The thesis that arose out of my first reading of the Auchinleck was not just that Arthur was an amalgamation of David and Alexander, or perhaps, to use an anachronism, an upgrade on the old operating system. It was something far deeper, and far more ephemeral: It was the realization of a Once and Future King. There seemed written between the lines an idea that this King corrected the sins and the mistakes of the previous two examples of kingship and then came back from his place of slumber—like Hawthorne's Gray Champion—to save a land and a people in need. The Once and Future King was not a man, but a spirit, or more accurately perhaps, an idea, passed down through the centuries. That idea, that Figure of Arthur, condensed the white and indistinct light of the divine, classical, and biblical heroes that came before into a single point, only to shatter it again into the rainbow of costumed heroes that we have today, heroes who celebrate differences and diversity instead of fearing, ostracizing, and condemning them; heroes who stick up for the little guy, because that's who they once were.

King Arthur represents for us the very first notions of the figures that we today call superheroes. The persistence, for so many centuries, of this tale of magic, myth, and fantasy shows that even though we—as individuals—have outgrown ideas like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, we are still willing to believe in a wizard, a magical sword, and a knight in shining armor. Not *believe*, but *believe in*. That tiny preposition makes a huge difference. If we *believed*

that superheroes existed, then we would wait for them to solve all of our problems. Something that contemporary artists and writers have shown us in the pages of such graphic novels as Superman: Peace on Earth, they cannot, and should not do. On the other hand, if we *believe in* our heroes, our superheroes, and if we *believe in* King Arthur, then maybe we can aspire to their heights, and learn from them. The point of King Arthur and superheroes is not the *action* of belief – whether or not the stories, narratives, legends, and myths are true – but the *notion* of belief – a belief in the possibility of redemption and, ultimately, of self-creation. As All-Star Superman teaches us, in a world without a Superman, we create our own.

Maybe by believing *in* them – in their moral codes, in the purity of their idealism – their fantastic abilities and the selfless devotion to use them in service of others can inspire us to see the great things mankind can accomplish and to actually strive to do them. Maybe we can fulfill the words that Marlon Brando, as Superman’s father Jor El, spoke in that first Superman film: “They are a great people Kal El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show them the way.”

The appeal of the Arthurian can be directly traced to the roles that he fulfills: the roles he inherited from Alexander and David, and those vested in him by the cultures that he has inhabited. He has been a lowly squire, a messianic hero, and a warrior, but at root, he was an illegitimate child—an Outsider—who became the High King of Britain. He did as Russel Crowe’s Jor El in 2013’s “Man of Steel” tells Henry Cavill’s Superman: “They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.”

Superman was a child of the stars, bound to this blue marble by horrific, apocalyptic circumstances. An alien, he was raised by salt-of-the-earth farmers, and grew up to become a successful, yet humble, big-city journalist. He is both the nerdy kid who everyone picks on, as

well as the most popular kid at school, just as his creators—Siegel and Schuster—originally conceived of him in 1934 (yes, it took Siegel and Schuster four years to develop and ultimately sell the character).

These heroes, all of them – that glorious rainbow of them – give us one thing above all: hope. That is why Arthur and his knights – both in armor and in spandex – have persisted for so long. They are not forced *upon* us, but continuously created and re-created *by* us, and by the centuries of readers, listeners, scribes, and poets who have been touched by—and who have themselves touched—the tale. The idea of a once and future king – of a recurring heroic spirit that reinvents itself with every age – is just enough to give us that hope, separate and apart from the dogma and blind faith of religion, immune to the fickle passions of politics.

We have invested so much in these heroes that even the men who merely put on the costume take on their essence. Chris Evans said of playing Steve Rogers: “When you revisit a character so many times you can’t help but try to absorb some of their traits and measure yourself against them ... In terms of, you know, morality, in terms of your personal integrity and the man you want to be? I’d like to believe I have more in common with Captain America. He sets a pretty high bar.”<sup>370</sup>

So it was with Christopher Reeve. He understood what Donner and every comic book writer already knew—that these heroes are the property of every boy or girl who has ever spent their weekly allowance on a comic book (I fondly remember being one of them), who has ever dared to dream, who has ever tied the nearest red towel around their neck as they watch Saturday morning cartoons. Indeed, as David Newman said: These heroes are *our* King Arthur. That idea of a knight in shining armor, riding a white steed into battle to stand for “truth, justice, all that

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<sup>370</sup> Baron, Zach. “Chris Evans is Having Second Thoughts.” *GQ*. 19 Sept. 2023.  
<https://www.gq.com/story/chris-evans-october-cover-profile-2023>

stuff,”<sup>371</sup> is present in each and every one of our comic book heroes. They are for us what Arthur was centuries ago. Yes, the tales strain science, logic, and belief, but not hope and imagination.

As former Marvel Editor in Chief Joe Quesada said, “Comic books have been around since the dawn of time, they just weren’t put on paper; they were put on cave walls ... Superhero comics are just an extension of that.”<sup>372</sup> Excalibur has turned into a star-spangled shield, and the Royal Pendragon has coiled itself into an S. A knight’s helm has turned into the cape and cowl, Hercules’ club into Thor’s hammer Mjolnir, David’s slingshot into Wonder Woman’s Lasso of Truth (a bit of poetic justice for the weapon of an adultering misogynist). And while these figurations of Arthur may look very different than either the Roman commander or medieval knight, they still carry that spirit, that idea.

Superman from Kingdom Come, page 117: “The powers we have ... the things we do ... they’re meant to inspire ordinary citizens.”

Evans’ Captain America leaves this message for Tony Stark after the two have a superpowered falling out that tears the Avengers asunder in “Captain America: Civil War” (2016): “I’ve been on my own since I was 18. I never really fit in anywhere, even in the army. My faith’s in people, I guess. Individuals. And I’m happy to say that, for the most part, they haven’t let me down. Which is why I can’t let them down either.”

Anette O’Toole, who has played both Clark Kent’s mother in the television show *Smallville* and Superman’s love interest Lana Lang in “Superman III” said: “I think we need Superman. I just think we have to have him. He’s hope. We have to believe that there’s someone who can save us. We have to believe that there’s someone who can make it OK.”<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> “Superman Returns.” DVD. Dir. Bryan Singer. Perf. Brandon Routh, Kate Bosworth, and Kevin Spacey. Warner Home Video, 2006.

<sup>372</sup> Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, 1:22:10.

<sup>373</sup> You Will Believe, 1:23:47.

When Christopher Reeve called “Superman” writer Tom Mankewicz to ask his advice on writing what would become the box office bomb “Superman IV: The Quest for Peace,” Mankewicz said, “Chris, you want to stay away from anything Superman can cure,” the message being that we cannot have our heroes tidily solving real-world issues that will persist long after the last frame has run out, or the last page has been flipped. In that ill-fated movie, Superman tries to rid the world of all nuclear weapons, but in the real world, those weapons of doom were still nestled in their silos.

In the February, 1940 edition of *Look Magazine*, Superman solved World War II in two pages, when in reality, the war and the horrors that went with it would persist for five more years. Not even Superman could change that. That is the consequence of these stories touching our world: For all the power that resides in their ideals and in their messages, it is not up to them to re-make the world. It is up to *us* to make them manifest, to use their inspiration to impel understanding, acceptance, and cooperation, because even superheroes can’t save the world alone. That’s why Arthur always has his Knights, or his Justice League, or his Avengers.

We cannot simply snap out fingers and conjure a better world, or a hero capable of making it so. Henry VII, a Tudor monarch, went so far as to name his first-born son Arthur, hoping that his nominative determinism would help usher in the King’s fabled return, but the boy died before he could take the throne. The pressure of the Tudors claiming Arthurian descent seemed to doom any attempt to bring about Arthur’s return by sheer force of will.

So why do we, today, in our age of science and of reason and of horrible doomsday weapons the likes of which can only be matched by comic book super villains, keep this spirit of the Arthurian alive? If these heroes, Arthurian and occasionally messianic though they may be, cannot solve our problems, then what use are they?

Because sometimes, even the most skeptical of us, the most jaded, cynical, broken, and bitter of us; the most educated, the most rational, the most practical of us, even the most hardened realists, when we are in our own blackest night, when we are in trouble, in need, or even just afraid in the dark, we have to have hope. It's hope that keeps us going both as individuals and as a species. It's hope that stirs up our hearts, and lets us believe, if even just for a moment – the moment when we need it most. It's the hope that urges us to look up in the sky and wonder: Is that a bird ...?

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