"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility": Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics

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THE LATE 1950S WERE A DIFFICULT TIME FOR COMIC BOOK PUBLISHERS IN America. Having faced a litany of charges from politicians and parental groups concerning the allegedly corrupting influence of comic books on American youth, publishers were forced to introduce new and less controversial genres in hopes of boosting declining sales. From the political attack levied by Senator Estes Kefauver in 1954 to the self-imposed comic book code introduced that same year, comic books were in serious trouble. The so-called "silver age" of comic books began in the late 1950s when National Comics, in the face of these restrictive comic book codes, revived a number of its original superheroes from the late 1930s. In particular, National Comics found success with a series called *The Justice League of America*, which united several popular figures such as Batman and Superman from the "golden age" of comics. This return to stories about costumed superheroes was an obvious retreat from the more realistic genres of crime and gangster stories that had produced such harsh criticism.

Inspired by National's idea, rival publisher Martin Goodman of Timely Comics ushered in the self-proclaimed "Marvel Age of Comics" when he asked his editor Stan Lee to design a superhero team to outdo *The Justice League*.[1] Collaborating with artist Jack Kirby, Lee published the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* in 1961, a series depicting the transformation of four ordinary individuals through exposure to cosmic rays into superheroes. In *The Origins of Marvel Comics*, Lee explains that his desire was to create "a team such as comicdom had never known"

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(17). To do so, he decided that "the characters would be the kind of characters [he] could personally relate to; they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have their faults and foibles" (17). The result was a revolution in the comic book industry that transformed the mildly successful Timely Comics into the popular franchise known as Marvel Comics. Following the success of his new team, Lee created a slew of immensely popular comics including *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

The difference, however, between these new superheroes and the ones from before and the difference between Lee and his competitors was that Marvel comics focused not only upon the wondrous abilities of its characters, but also upon the lived reality of the superheroes themselves, that is, upon the ways in which the mundane problems of human existence interfered with their crimefighting abilities. Whether it was Spider-Man's difficulties with his classmates at school or Iron Man's persistent problems with women, the new Marvel superheroes embodied a sense of rootedness. As Lee explained, he thought of his characters "as real, living, breathing people whose personal relationships would be of interest to the readers" (*Excelsior* 114). Fantastic powers aside, most Marvel heroes were laden with typical problems plaguing the 1950s and spoke to the anxieties of a culture in an atomic age. Not simply a meaningless product directed toward young children, Marvel comic books were now consumed by young adults and college students and consequently became one of the most popular cultural expressions of the twentieth century, selling millions of copies each month throughout the 1960s.

Building the Marvel Universe

The individual responsible for the resurgence of comic books in the early 1960s was Stan Lee, the editor-in-chief at Marvel Comics.[2] Born on December 28, 1922 in Manhattan to Romanian parents, Stanley Lieber was hired in 1939 at the age of seventeen by Timely Comics. Working as an assistant to Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, the two main writers at Timely, Lieber believed his stint in the world of comic books was temporary, preferring to think of himself as a burgeoning highbrow writer. Refusing to assign his name to such publications, the young writer used the pen name Stan Lee when his first story appeared in *Captain America #3* in May 1941. Lee's hiring at Timely came at an

opportune moment for the young writer because in the winter of 1941, both Kirby and Simon left for a rival company, leaving Lee the sole writer and editor. After owner Martin Goodman hired a number of freelance writers to keep the company operating, young Stan Lee found himself editor-in-chief at a company publishing forty or fifty different comic book titles.

The decade following the World War II witnessed several major transformations in comic book publishing. The first was a shift in the content of comics themselves. The "golden age" of comics began in 1938 when National Periodical publications (later to become DC Comics) introduced the first costumed superhero, a caped figure from the planet Krypton. Selling approximately 900,000 copies each month, *Superman* was the first in a series of groundbreaking comics featuring popular new superheroes such as Wonder Woman, Batman, and Captain Marvel. By 1941, war mobilization provided a new landscape for these characters, as many superheroes found themselves battling Nazi soldiers and Japanese invaders. Yet by the war's end, the reading public had begun to tire of shopworn stories about foreign threats, resulting in the cancellation of a number of previously popular series. But the slack in sales of superhero comics was corrected by a number of new genres that entered the postwar market. Stan Lee participated in this shift by opening the pages of Timely Comics to more realistic genres, including romance stories and westerns. The result was an explosion in the industry, pushing monthly sales of comic books to an estimated seventy to one hundred million (Wright 155).

But like other forms of popular culture thriving in the midst of the Cold War, comic books soon suffered from such success.[3] Linking the rise in juvenile delinquency to the ubiquity of popular culture, parental groups and politicians warned against the dangers of rock 'n' roll and television on America's children. Comic books attracted particular attention after psychiatrist Fredric Wertham began a personal crusade in his famous 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* to demonstrate that comic books were "morally disarming" children (90). The result was the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954 and the appointment of an advisory committee, the Comics Code Authority, to regulate content. The effect of such negative publicity was disastrous. Publishers were also devastated, as Amy Nyberg has noted, by the collapse of the largest distributor of comics, the American News Company, in 1952 (125). Consequently, many publishing

companies did not survive. Those that did, in particular Archie Comics and National Comics, had to deal with competition from television for children's attention and with a lingering social stigma. Hoping to quell public concerns, Stan Lee decided to forge a new direction in the industry.

The Fantastic Four and the Containment of the American Family

A conservative social agenda marked Marvel's return to the realm of fantasy. First published in 1961, *The Fantastic Four* introduced what was to become the Marvel Universe, a series of comic books linking the lives, exploits, and personalities of costumed superheroes in provocative ways. According to Lee, his main consideration was to deconstruct the traditional image of superheroes as otherworldly beings by making them "talk like real people and react like real people" (Braun 41). The inspiration for the new comic book came in part from Lee's wife, Joan, who had recently begun lecturing him on his inability to put "as much effort and creativity into the comics" (*Origins* 16) as he had in his other creative efforts. Determined to establish a satisfying career "in the nowhere world of comic books" (16), Lee, with artistic help from Jack Kirby who had returned to Marvel, hoped to "startle" readers with his new comics.

The first issue of *The Fantastic Four* is set into motion when a brilliant scientist named Dr. Reed Richards convinces his fiancée, Sue Storm; her younger brother, a temperamental teenager named Johnny Storm; and a fellow friend Ben Grimm, to participate in a risky flight into space. After receiving extraordinary exposure to cosmic rays, the ship crashes to the ground and the team emerges from the wreckage to discover they now have superhuman powers—Reed can stretch his body to tremendous lengths; Sue can become invisible; Johnny can turn into a blazing flame; and Ben has transformed into an orange, rock-skinned creature. Collectively deciding to use their powers "to help mankind" (*#1* 20), the group becomes the Fantastic Four, individually renaming themselves Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and the Thing. The difficulty Lee faced with his new team, however, was finding a concept to link them together. *The Justice League* was simply a collaboration between established superheroes that

seemed artificial at best. Deciding to foreground the relationships between his characters, Lee tapped into popular discourse about the nuclear family. Of course, the Fantastic Four was not an actual family—Lee was very cognizant of the difficulties such a concept posed. But the team *functioned* as a family, and their success against a series of supervillains was dependent upon the solidity of their relationships.

It was of course not surprising that Lee appropriated the discourse surrounding the family to compose his new team. The nuclear family at the onset of the Cold War provided, as Elaine Tyler May has noted, "a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world" (3). Using the domestic veil as an ideological tool to promote everything from rising consumption levels to traditional gender roles to Cold War foreign policy, experts connected economic and political security to the stability of the family unit. As *Reader's Digest* explained in 1951, "wars can come, jobs can go, money can run out, but if father, mother and children stand by each other, hope and happiness may survive" (Link 47). Using such language, Lee introduces the Fantastic Four as "the most amazing quartet in history" (*#1* 25), and each character represents a prescribed familial role. As leader of the team, Reed Richards is the paternal figure. His superhero name Mr. Fantastic signifies his authority, and he is continuously breaking apart Ben and Johnny whenever an internal dispute erupts. As Reed's fiancée, Sue serves the maternal role, providing tenderness to the other members. In reaction to reader responses that Sue does not "contribute enough" to the team, Reed quotes Abraham Lincoln who "said that all that he was—all that he ever hoped to be—he owed to [his mother]" (*#11* 10). As Sue's younger brother, Johnny is the adolescent of the group, described as a "flaming teenager" (*#4* 11) in reference both to his superpowers and to his immaturity. Finally, as the whiniest and most temperamental member, Ben represents the infant of the family, wearing only a pair of blue underwear resembling a diaper.

Yet the continual instability of the group reflected the fact that popular discourse in the 1950s ironically enough never settled upon what the American family should look like, as educators and psychologists tried unsuccessfully to normalize the family image. Concerns over juvenile delinquency produced a range of psychological theories concerning childrearing (Gomes). Family stability was also in question as divorce rates increased throughout the 1950s, prompting religious leaders and counselors to suggest ways "to save the family" ("How to

Save" 76). Experts argued that a successful family had to act as a unit, remaining involved in each other's personal lives and demonstrating affection for the group. For instance, *Reader's Digest* suggested family rituals to create "a sense of continuity and comradeship" (Lobsenz 142). But such devotion, psychologists argued, had to be tempered by an identity outside the family and a level of personal independence from household commitments. Reflecting such advice, the members of the Fantastic Four not only have distinct superpowers but each has their own interests—Reed performs scientific experiments, Sue socializes with other women, Johnny works on his car, and Ben stirs up trouble with the neighborhood gang. But their common focal point is always the team itself. For instance, in *The Fantastic Four #15*, the group decides upon a "temporary separation," as each team member devotes themselves to outside projects. In doing so, a villain named the Thinker conquers New York City, but he is easily defeated when the team, after each member becomes disenchanted with life outside the group, reassembles, prompting Sue to declare "we're all together again, as we should be" (20).

But Lee and Kirby recognized that they needed a more provocative way of explaining the team's interaction and consequently they appropriated the language of psychoanalysis. It was no surprise that Lee and Kirby would adopt Freudianism as an explanatory tool considering the enormous popularity of psychoanalysis in the postwar period.[4] As the editors at *Newsweek* declared in 1955, "the U.S. is without doubt the most psychologically oriented, or psychiatrically oriented nation in the world" (Havemann 59). In a country obsessed with the structure of the family and concerned about the perceived rise in neurotic behavior, the popularization of psychoanalysis was not surprising. Consequently, the Fantastic Four is not simply a replica of the nuclear family; the team is also an embodiment of the human personality, as a never-ending struggle between the id, the ego, and the superego for dominance. While functioning as the infant of the group, the Thing is also the libidinal component. Ben Grimm's transformation into a rock-skinned monster signifies his rapid descent into the unconscious realm of aggressive energies. His monstrous persona is representative of popular characterizations of the id—as "a sort of beast within, crude and demanding" (Havemann 123). In the first issue, Ben is described as a "walking nightmare" (*#1* 5), and the team recognizes that "sooner or later the Thing will run amok and none of us will be able to stop him" (*#2* 6).

In reality, the only figure able to restrain Ben is Mr. Fantastic who utilizes his elastic body to bind and hogtie the Thing whenever he becomes too aggressive. Functioning as the superego of the team's personality, Reed serves as the embodiment of law and discipline. He always implores Ben to control his temper, telling the rock-skinned creature to let "the law" handle prosecuting their villains (#*3* 22). Further paralleling these Freudian overtones, a deliberate Oedipal relationship dominates the team's interaction. Sexual competitiveness between Reed and Ben over Sue marks their relationship, and in many of the early episodes, Ben laments having lost Sue to Reed, wanting her "to look at [him] the way she looks at [Reed]" (16). Balancing the tension between Reed and Ben is Johnny who, as Sue's brother, does not exhibit the same Oedipal conflict and who learns, with the help of Reed's direction, to forego his juvenile impulses and accept responsibility for the team. As a representation of the hopeful outcome of Reed and Ben's struggle, Johnny serves as a model for the proper development of the individual ego.

But the difficulty Stan Lee faced in structuring his family along psychoanalytic lines was in determining how the story's narrative was to operate. Interested both in revealing the difficulties the modern family faced and in reaffirming its ideological importance in containing communism, Lee was unable to move his team beyond its original dynamic. In part, the problem stemmed from Lee's inability to decide which element of the personality was to drive the story. The success of the Fantastic Four then rested not just with the story's superheroes but also with a series of ingenious supervillains that Lee and Kirby created, including Dr. Doom and the Sub-Mariner, making the series a morality tale about the power of the nuclear family to defeat intruders. But recognizing the limitations inherent within the series, Lee decided to explore the particularities of each character separately in the line of new comics he created after *The Fantastic Four*. For his next character, Lee drew upon the surprising success of the most popular character of *The Fantastic Four*, the Thing, and created a new monster with which to explore the unconscious dynamics of the human id.

The Postwar Crisis of Masculinity and the Birth of the Incredible Hulk

The conservative bent of *The Fantastic Four* was due in part to the cultural climate surrounding comic books in the late fifties. With

memories of the recent political storm, Lee was determined not to stray from the strict guidelines provided by the Comics Code Authority. As a result, there was nothing threatening about his new series, and his utilization of the nuclear family to fight the war on communism seemed commonplace. But with the success of *The Fantastic Four*, Lee began dismantling his original series. With *The Incredible Hulk*, which first appeared in 1962, Lee echoed growing fears about the personal costs of the Cold War. *The Incredible Hulk* series served two purposes: first, it was an explicit warning about the dangers of scientific and technological developments and was one of many pieces of popular culture that used monstrous images to issue warnings about nuclear holocaust; second, and more importantly, the series also intervened in a debate about a growing crisis in American masculinity prompted by the recent prioritization of the nuclear family.

Lee's depiction of Reed Richards as a benevolent scientist was part of a much larger national discussion about the role of science. Following the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an intense debate emerged not just about national security but also about the character of the scientific men with whom the public had entrusted its safety. As *Look* magazine explained in 1958, "scientists have pictured themselves as very special, aloof, inhuman creatures, and our press and entertainment media have continued to make them appear monotonous and unappealing" (Mead 56). Moreover, declining numbers of college students entering the scientific profession alarmed politicians about the possibility of falling behind in the technological race of the Cold War. National publications such as *Scientific American*, *Time*, and *Life* ran exposes of prominent scientists to quell public fears over their loyalty. For instance, clinical psychologist Anne Roe conducted an examination of sixty-four prominent American scientists in order to understand "what makes the scientific mind scientific" ("What Makes" 21). Characterized by "curiosity" and "objectivity," the scientific mind, according to Roe, was free of the ideological baggage that hampered other professions ("Psychologist" 25).

Marvel Comics recognized the importance of rehabilitating the image of the nation's scientists, a point that was incredibly prevalent after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. The image of Reed Richards as both the leader and paternal figure of the group reflected Stan Lee's attempt to elevate the image of the men of science. While Johnny and Ben repeatedly question their role as superheroes, Reed always implores

the group to use their powers "to help mankind . . . to fight evil and injustice" (*#3* 15). Most issues foreground one of Reed's inventions, including, most spectacularly, the Fantastic Four's secret headquarters, a multilevel complex containing the group's laboratories and testing rooms. Reed's major commitment throughout the series is to use his scientific knowledge to help the United States defeat the Soviet Union. For instance, in *The Fantastic Four #13*, Reed discovers a "booster fuel" that will help "catch up with the Reds in the race to the moon" (*#13* 2).

But it was incredibly difficult to rehabilitate the image of the nation's scientists due to growing anxieties over the atomic weapons that they had unleashed onto the world. In countless science fiction novels and films including *The Blob*, *The Thing from Another World*, and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, modern scientists were portrayed as myopic figures, a sentiment reflected in Marvel's next comic book, *The Incredible Hulk*. Created by Lee and Kirby, *The Incredible Hulk* announced the entrance of "the strangest man of all time" (*#1* 1). Borrowing the concept from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and basing his main character on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stan Lee "decided to have a normal man, Dr. Bruce Banner, transform into a monster and back again" (*Excelsior* 121). After exposure to gamma radiation on the testing grounds of a military site, a scientist named Dr. Banner transforms into a "hulking thing" that wreaks havoc upon the world.

Basing the Hulk's appearance on James Whale's 1931 film version of Shelley's novel, Lee and Kirby updated the Gothic tradition with their version of the presumptive scientist. On one level, Shelley's novel is a parable about the dangers of violating the basic tenets of scientific practices predicated upon the free exchange of information (Rauch). Like Victor Frankenstein who conducts his experiments in isolation, Dr. Banner refuses to share the secrets of the bomb with his fellow scientists, instead secretly hiding his "report on the gamma ray bomb" (*#1* 10). On another level, the Gothic novel cautions against the Enlightenment's misguided faith in the capacity of reason to subdue the excesses of human nature. As such, the Hulk represents the unconscious aggression linked to Banner's scientific experiments—as a warning against the destructive powers of technological development. The irony consists in the fact that Banner, who personally developed "the most awesome weapon ever created by man," detests "men who think with their fists" (*#1* 2).

Lee's invocation of the Gothic tradition to discuss the nuclear age echoed many public comments concerning the atomic bomb. For instance, after the bombings in Japan, news commentator H. V. Kaltenborn exclaimed "for all we know, we have created a Frankenstein" (Winkler 29). Postwar invocations of the Gothic tradition marked the acknowledgement of what Frances Ferguson has termed "the nuclear sublime"—the inability to imagine the destructive potential of atomic warfare. Reports from the initial testing of the bomb in July 1945 testified to its incomprehensible power and the incapacity of language to describe it. As one scientist claimed, "the atom bomb did not fit into any preconceptions possessed by anybody" (Rhodes 674). Lee invoked the speechlessness of these atomic scientists to describe Dr. Banner's own experience. At the moment of exposure to "the full force of the mysterious gamma rays" pouring through Dr. Banner's body, "the world seems to stand still, trembling on the brink of infinity" (*#1* 4).

But while the Hulk seems incredibly menacing in the first issue of the series, it was apparent that Lee intended to portray him not just as a monster but also as a sympathetic antihero, a move that complicated the meaning attached to the green-skinned beast. In part, Lee hoped his new comic would be as popular as *The Fantastic Four* and he therefore intentionally based the Hulk on the Thing, the disgruntled but sympathetic monster of the original series. The connection between the Hulk and the Thing was made explicit in *The Fantastic Four #5* when Johnny Storm, reading an issue of the first Incredible Hulk comic, tells his teammate that the green-skinned monster reminds him of the Thing. As Lee explained in *The Origins of Marvel Comics*, he envisioned the Hulk as "a somewhat nice-looking monster, big and brutish enough to make him feared by all who met him and yet with a certain tragic appeal that would make our readers care about him and cheer him on" (76).

Thus the initial concern about nuclear holocaust presented in the first issue was quickly supplanted by the other ideological purpose the Hulk served—as a symbolic attempt to solve the growing crisis in American masculinity within postwar life.[5] Indeed, *The Incredible Hulk* was centered upon a long-standing debate about the character of the American male. Magazines throughout the period testified to a profound concern over modern man. For instance, *Reader's Digest* ran a number of articles that asked "What's wrong with American men?" In 1958 *Look* magazine documented the travails of the American male,

asking three questions—"Why do women dominate him?," "Why is he afraid to be different?," and "Why does he work so hard?" This concern about the male role stemmed from a series of postwar social changes. The most substantial shift was the rise of postindustrialism, as the country transformed from a goods-producing society to a service-centered one and the American worker transformed from the brawny, muscular industrial laborer from the turn-of-the-century into the conformist white-collar worker of the 1950s. No longer engaging in the harsh physical demands of productive labor, the middle-class male of the new corporate order, as most critics declared, bore little relation to his forbearer (see, for instance, Richard Smith 1955). Others were preoccupied with man's supposed moral weakening as well. Arguing that the "clothes, manners, speech, attitudes—and ideas" of the white-collar worker were "all studied stereotypes," commentators linked the problem of conformity to the new economic order (Getty 47). Books such as Robert Lindner's *Must You Conform?* and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* noted the incessant pressure to subordinate individual life to "the social imperatives of the organization" (7). Pundits and intellectuals alike characterized the white-collar male as "the miserable male," "the one-dimensional man," "the domesticated male," and "the homogenized man."

As a mildly effeminate intellectual, Dr. Banner is portrayed in the same terms. No longer an independent scientist like Reed Richards, Banner is trapped within the bureaucratic ranks of the scientific-military alliance, embodied by his commander General "Thunderbolt" Ross, and Banner resents the impositions to which he is forced to adhere. Moreover, Banner is portrayed as a "milksop" with "no guts" who is unable to assert his own demands (#*1* 1). As a "weak" and "soft" organization man, Banner is derided by General Ross as a "puny weakling" (10). In contrast to the monster he becomes, Banner describes himself as "a scientist, not a man of action" (#*2* 5). The difficulty for men like Dr. Banner resided in the fact that no solution was readily available to help them deal with the conflicting demands made upon them. Consumer culture presented conflicting images of what constituted true masculine identity, simultaneously evoking "the image of man the warrior, man the conqueror of animate and inanimate nature" (Sisk 311) and the image of man as the responsible suburban husband. Fitness gurus such as Jack LaLanne urged the domesticated male to reclaim his physical strength and endurance through strenuous

exercise. A number of magazines targeted specifically for men such as *Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men*, and *Impact: Bold True Action for Men* offered some refuge as did detective novels and Mickey Spillane stories (Kimmel 253).

One of the most prominent ways to refortify masculinity was the widespread investigation into the archaic nature of man in order to reconnect with the primitive nature of human subjectivity that had been repressed by modern life. As M. Keith Booker notes in his study of postwar movies, the widespread "monsters-from-the-id theme" in popular films such as *Forbidden Planet* and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* resonated with the new focus on "our own primitive past" (114). Of course invocations of the primitive nature of modern man as a solution to the problem of masculinity were not limited to popular culture. A number of postwar artists appropriated "primitiveness" as a form of social critique. For instance, the New York group of abstract expressionist painters, including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, appropriated non-Western cultural traditions of primitive societies to tap into a proposed archaic state of being. Most famously, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and a host of Beat writers descended into the "subterranean" realm of human nature, and Norman Mailer, in his 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," urged his readers "to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (339). Invocations of the archaic served two purposes. First, they shed light upon the self-destructive impulses inherent within modern man, revealed most emphatically through concentration camps and atomic bombs. But they also signaled an exuberant energy residing at the core of man that might protect him from psychic or physical subordination. The primitive savage was thus both cause of and solution to the problems of collectivist ideologies.

As "half-man, half-monster," the Hulk represents the repressed side of man that had vanished with the appearance of organization men like Banner. One postwar commentator noted that the problem for man seemed "inherent in his genetic structure, from forebears from the mists of time," destabilized by "a shrinking, explosive world" (Hoffman 124). The green-skinned monster is a representation of that primal masculinity—wild and unbound yet suppressed by the demands of decorum. As Stan Lee asked in an early issue, "can a man with green skin and a petulant personality find true happiness in today's

status-seeking society" (#*60* 1). Banner himself recognizes the importance of unleashing this primitive side, confessing that "each time I become the Hulk, I grow more and more unwilling to return to my normal self" (#*5* 4). Moreover, reversion to his primitive self does not negate Banner's moral impulses; in fact, the Hulk possesses a seemingly innate ability to achieve a moral certitude others cannot. For example, in *The Incredible Hulk #3*, a series of small towns fall under the hypnotic spell of the Ringleader. The only figure able to resist his spell is the Hulk who easily defeats the villain. In fact, many episodes end with the Hulk ironically saving the life of General Ross and then escaping into the mountains to evade capture.

While *The Fantastic Four* aligned closely with "the domestic mystique" of the Cold War, *The Incredible Hulk*, by inverting the moral implications of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, helped liberate the American male from his new familial constraints. As Berthold Schoene-Harwood has noted, Shelley's novel is a critique of the ideological pressures placed upon the male psyche to adhere to a demarcated set of characteristics that define masculinity in terms of manly adventure and the evasion of domestic responsibility (12). In contrast, Banner's transformation into the Hulk allows him to ignore any pressure to commit to familial demands. In the series, Banner is romantically pursued by Betty Ross, the daughter of General Ross, and although he has some romantic feelings for her, Banner's continual transformation into the Hulk negates any reconciliation with her marital demands. At one point, Betty herself exasperatedly declares that "it seems only yesterday when I first met Bruce . . . before the horror of the Hulk came between us" (#*4* 2). Moreover, while the Thing becomes domesticated in the early issues of *The Fantastic Four*, as his anger is tempered when he falls in love with a blind woman named Alicia, his counterpart, the Hulk, never reconciles with Banner's love interest. With the Hulk, Stan Lee pried the Thing out from his subordination within the nuclear family and transformed him into a hulking beast with free reign over his existence.

Iron Man and the Rise of the "Playboy"

Of course bestiality as a solution to the problems of individual autonomy was practical only within the world of fantasy or for a small

number of rebellious artists and Beat writers who, in the Marvel universe, contributed nothing to national security. Stan Lee's attempt to answer the questions raised by *The Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk* on a practical level began with *Iron Man*. With this 1963 series, Lee took the premise of *The Incredible Hulk* a step further by exploring the demands of the Cold War not just on bureaucratic figures like Dr. Banner but on the nation's industrial leaders as well. The story concerns a wealthy industrialist Anthony Stark, described as "both a sophisticate and a scientist," who is "soon destined to become the most tragic figure on earth" (*#39* 3). While working on military experiments in the jungles of Vietnam, Stark is captured by the communist tyrant Wong-Chu and fatally wounded by "much shrapnel near his heart" (5). In order to save himself, Stark constructs a "mighty, electronic body" to "keep [his] heart beating after the shrapnel reaches it" (6). At first unable to maneuver his "massive, unbelievably powerful iron shell," Stark eventually masters his "new body" and defeats Wong-Chu. Afterwards, Stark contemplates his new existential condition of having to "spend the rest of [his] life in this iron prison" (9). But Stark soon adapts to his new condition and dedicates himself to helping "America's Cold War struggle against the communist menace" (2). As a modern knight, Iron Man is a protective force against the subversive influence of communist infiltration. For example, in *Tales of Suspense #40*, Stark returns from visiting his girlfriend to discover that a villain named Gargantus has subdued the townspeople through "mass-hypnotizing" (12). Created by aliens from outer space who are trying to turn the human race into slaves, Gargantus is quickly defeated by Iron Man.

As a model for his new character, Lee referenced Howard Hughes who "had designed, built, and flown his own plane and had been a billionaire industrialist inventor" (*Excelsior* 160). Described by the *New York Times* as a "no-man in the land of yes-men," Hughes embodied the image of the independent, self-mastering industrialist of turn-of-the-century capitalism, compared with the likes of Henry Ford as "a contemporary example of the genus Rugged Individualists" (Hill 14). Having conquered the oil business under the Hughes Tool Company and aviation manufacturing with his controlling interest in Trans World Airlines, Hughes was described in 1959 as "the proprietor of the largest pool of industrial wealth still under the absolute control of a single individual" (Murphy and Wise 79). He also used his enterprises

to support the Cold War effort and was one of the most prominent defense contractors, developing guided missiles and electronic airplane guidance systems. In a world of domesticated males, Lee referenced the self-mastering entrepreneur of decades past, and within the pages of *Iron Man*, Stark's technical prowess, from constructing "atomic naval cannons" to "space capsules" to "burp-guns," becomes essential to the "US defense effort" (#*41* 3).

In linking scientific advancements to the effort of individual entrepreneurs, Lee connected Iron Man's powers to Stark's technological wizardry, in particular, his "contribution to micro-transistor research" (#*40* 2). Of course Stark's independent research endeavors did not conform to the general drift of scientific investigation in the 1950s, as the Cold War effort radically altered the relationship between science, the military, and the government. It was this transformation that set the tone for the major conflict in *Iron Man*. Beginning primarily during World War II and escalating throughout the ensuing decades, major scientific research in the United States was linked to the demands of military defense, and the federal government soon became the primary patron of research and development.[6] For instance, the Department of Defense and the Office of Naval Research sponsored research facilities at hundreds of universities including MIT, Cornell, and Stanford and contributed by 1960 at least $5.5 billion in research funds (Leslie 1). Military research became interdisciplinary and even international with the formation of large scientific communities organized around specific defense problems.

But many scientists worried about the motives of their new federal sponsor. Alvin Weinberg, director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, stirred up national controversy in 1961 when he warned that "big science" as developed in American university and research facilities was threatening the grounds of traditional scientific practices. According to Weinberg, the virtues of "little science" based on "small-scale excellence" and small-scale independent research facilities had been displaced by the "triple diseases" of "big science"—"journalitis, moneyitis, administratitis" ("Big Science" 15). Even more disturbing was the developing federal security clearance system that, under the National Security Act of 1947, instituted dramatic curtailments of access to national defense initiatives. Beginning in the late 1940s, scientists began rallying against federal investigations into their social, political, and private lives. Most famously David Lilienthal, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, warned that progress in the atomic

energy program was threatened by "the abuse, distortion, and defamation to which American scientists were exposed" ("Atomic Progress" 197).

Even a scientist as important as Tony Stark was not immune to such pressures, and one of the main narratives threads of *Iron Man* concerns Stark's continuing problems with military officials who are trying to control his research and who begin questioning his loyalty. For example, in *Tales of Suspense #46*, a Russian agent named the Crimson Dynamo sabotages Stark's testing of a new missile, which has been built by his company for the US defense department, causing members in the Pentagon to question Stark's loyalty. Suspecting he might be a secret agent causing the United States to "fall behind the communists," a group of senators decides to "investigate Stark thoroughly" (8). This suspicion on the part of government officials concerning Stark's real ambitions is the first of many worries about his loyalty. Where he was once an independent researcher, Stark soon finds himself reduced to a dependent actor within the military-industrial complex (a movement similar to Bruce Banner's own dilemma) and subservient to a bureaucratic governmental authority.

All of this is dramatically symbolized in the life-threatening wound that Stark receives in the first issue of the series. Having decided to bestow Stark with "some secret sorrow, some secret-life-and-death problem that would plague and torment him each day of his life" (*Origins* 46), Stan Lee portrayed Stark's wounded heart as symptomatic of the historical transformation of industrialists like Stark to the level of organization men. *Iron Man* was just one in a long line of fictionalized accounts of a wounded man unable to adjust to postwar society. The symbolic effect of these images of injured men represented what Kaja Silverman has termed a "historical trauma," the moment in which "history sometimes manages to *interrupt* or even *deconstitute* what a society assumes to be its master narratives and immanent Necessity" (55). Indeed, *Iron Man* centers on Stark's inability to reconcile with this wound to his masculinity, symbolized by his castrated condition. As Peter Sanderson notes, "though Iron Man could fly through the air, Stan Lee's stories often found him lying prone and nearly helpless on the floor, having depleted his battlesuit's power supplies" (112). Practically every issue features an uncertain moment when Iron Man must flee from a desperate struggle with a supervillain to recharge his chest plate in order to stay alive.

But to restore Stark's sense of masculinity Lee turned to a new cultural image that severed the connection between manhood and

domesticity that the discourse on the nuclear family had established. Besides his role as Iron Man, Stark is also portrayed as "rich, handsome, known as a glamorous *playboy*, constantly in the company of beautiful, adoring women" (#*39* 3). Developed by Hugh Hefner, *Playboy* represented a revolution in the development of men's magazines. Recognizing that the middle-class, white-collar male had no available images with which to shore up his identity as a man, Hefner fashioned an image of the sophisticated bachelor maintaining discreet relations with women as a way to anchor the ideological drift of the organization man by foregrounding sex as the foundation of male control. As Barbara Ehrenreich has maintained, *Playboy* offered a coherent agenda for refashioning masculinity by providing "a critique of marriage, a strategy for liberation (reclaiming the indoors as a realm for masculine pleasure), and a utopian vision (defined by its unique commodity ensemble)," all as an escape "from the bondage of breadwinning" (50–51).

As a famous playboy courting beautiful women and romancing movie stars, Tony Stark carves a separate identity for himself that does not partake of domesticity, marital commitments, or workplace demands. Despite the life-threatening injury he has received in the war against communism and despite the personal compromises he must make in his relationship with the military, Stark is able to reconstitute his wounded masculinity through his sexuality. Unable and unwilling to commit to the women around him, in particular, his personal secretary who is infatuated with him, Stark follows the lead of other cultural and literary figures such as Ian Fleming, Mickey Spillane, and Norman Mailer who made unregulated sexuality a form of authenticity. In fact, Iron Man is one of the few Marvel heroes who regular engages in battle with female villains, most of whom fall under the romantic spell of Tony Stark. Recognizing the difficulty in reasserting the autonomy of the individual in the postwar landscape and realizing that the primitiveness of the Hulk was not quite practical, Stan Lee turned to the pages of *Playboy* magazine to rethink the contours of male identity.

The Amazing Spider-Man and the Birth of the Teenager

Of course the adventures of an existential playboy did not necessarily coincide with the personal concerns of most Marvel readers. Deciding to try something "different," Lee introduced a new character in the last

issue of a comic series called *Amazing Fantasy*. Inspired by an old pulp magazine, *The Spider, Master of Men*, the editor decided to "break all the rules" (*Origins* 133) by basing the story on a teenager. Lee's intention was to create a story "in which nothing would progress according to formula—the situations, the cast of characters, and their relationship to each other would all be unusual and unexpected" (133). The story was originally only a one-issue comic, but when Marvel owner Martin Goodman noticed the sales of *Amazing Fantasy #15*, he instructed Lee to reintroduce the character in a new series. The result was *The Amazing Spider-Man*, first appearing in 1963 and soon becoming the best-selling comic book in the Marvel library.

While Lee has suggested that his decision to create a superhero based on a young adolescent was "just for kicks," he must have been aware that he was tapping into a growing discourse over America's new "teenagers." The postwar social order witnessed the birth of the "teenager," a distinct social group and a distinct stage of adolescent development, caused by changing educational structures, familial shifts, and economic prosperity. Indeed, as Grace Palladino has noted, it was not until the 1940s, with the expansion of public schools and the educational system as a whole, that the "teenager" made an appearance. As the fifties wore on, many critics recognized that the teenager was not going to disappear and argued that listening to teenagers could be profitable. In a series of reports, advertiser Eugene Gilbert urged businesses to design consumer goods that took advantage of "the vast purchasing power" and "ever-expanding" (20) size of the teenage population. The result was an explosion in teenage culture—from magazines to movies to music, teenagers seemed ubiquitous.

Comic books of course were one of the most popular cultural products consumed by adolescents in the 1950s. But Marvel Comics took all of this a step further by prominently featuring teenagers *within* its pages. For instance, *The Fantastic Four* describes the adolescent anxieties of Johnny Storm, and *The Incredible Hulk* features Rick Jones, the teenage friend of Dr. Banner. But Stan Lee soon tired of the number of sidekicks populating recent comic books and decided to feature a teenager as a superhero, a teenager "with all the problems, hang-ups, and angst of any teenager" (*Excelsior* 126). First appearing in 1962 in *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the story of Spider-Man is centered around a young high-school student named Peter Parker. Described by his peers as "Midtown High's only professional wallflower" (*#15* 1), Peter is a

kind, well-respected honor student who lives with his elderly aunt and uncle. One evening while attending a scientific exhibition on "experiments in radioactivity" (2), he is bitten by a spider that has absorbed tremendous amounts of radioactive waves and is bestowed with superhuman strength and the ability to scale walls. But instead of doing something valuable with his powers, Peter becomes an entertainer, participating in a wrestling tournament and appearing on the Ed Sullivan show. After leaving his first television appearance, Peter watches a burglar run past him in the hallway but does not stop him. When a police officer asks him why he did not help, Peter claims that "from now on I just look out for number one—that means—me!" (8). He soon regrets his decision, however, when his Uncle Ben is murdered by the same burglar Peter had encountered in the television studio.

Under a blatant psychoanalytic framework, Peter realizes he is partly responsible for his uncle's death. In tears, Peter openly acknowledges that the murder is "my fault—all my fault! If only I had stopped him when I could have!" (11). The result is that Peter brushes aside his juvenile inclinations and realizes "that in this world, with great power there must also come—great responsibility" (11). Having obliquely participated in the death of his only father figure, Peter accepts responsibility for caring for his aunt and for fighting crime in Manhattan. Such tragic beginnings allowed Lee to invest Peter with a tormented personality. Indeed, Spider-Man's battles with criminals are in many ways secondary to the turmoil of a young man struggling with maturity. For instance, Peter is responsible for paying the family's bills. He is also tormented by his classmates. Most importantly, he suffers a series of romantic hardships beginning with his first love, Betty. Making considerable use of the "thought balloon," which allowed him to express the anguished thoughts of his new superhero, Lee crafted Peter as a confused teenager. As Lee explained, "Peter Parker was the first, and may still be the only, introspective hero, one who thinks and talks to himself about his problems" (*Excelsior* 128). Hoping to connect with his readers, Lee described the costumed hero to his audience as "the world's most amazing teen-ager—Spider-Man—the superhero who could be—you" (#9 22).

But *Spider-Man* was not simply centered on the trials of a young adolescent; the comic book had a much more serious agenda, owing in part to one of its creators, Steven Ditko. Although a long-standing public feud between Ditko and Lee has clouded Spider-Man's origins,

Lee has recently agreed "to share the credit" with Ditko and call himself the "cocreator" of the series (*Excelsior* 131). Lee chose Ditko instead of his regular collaborator Jack Kirby to draw *Spider-Man* because the young artist strove, according to Lee, "for total realism" in his work and refused to "exaggerate" or make his characters "as heroically handsome as possible" (*Origins* 135). As the series moved along, Ditko began to plot the stories himself and then turned the artwork over the Lee who added the dialogue. But equally important as Ditko's ability to depict "the average man in the street" (135) was his burgeoning interest in the philosophical ideas of novelist Ayn Rand, ideas that soon crept into the pages of *Spider-Man* and gave the superhero his particular appeal.[7]

Ditko was not alone in turning to Ayn Rand for a philosophical orientation. By the early 1960s a growing movement of young college students attracted to Rand's philosophy had emerged, a group prevalent enough for major journals such as *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* to mark for their readers "the curious cult of Ayn Rand" (Kobler 98). By 1961 *The Fountainhead* had sold approximately 1.3 million copies and *Atlas Shrugged* had sold one million. Likewise, Ayn Rand clubs began sprouting up on college campuses across the country. In fact, Rand's philosophy served as an odd bridge between the New Right, represented by the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), and the New Left, centered around the radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). While the patriotic fervor and economic conservatism of YAF had little in common with the antiauthoritarian politics of SDS, large segments of both groups, as Rebecca Klatch has noted, coalesced around an emerging libertarian position that stressed the sanctity of the individual in the face of political repression, conscription into the military, and a noxious consumer culture (121). In fact, Rand was one of the few writers named by members of both student organizations as influential.

Her popular 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* marked Rand's entrance into American political discourse, and her polemics against expansive governmental programs and welfare policies earned her a following in conservative circles. But it was the radical individualism of her main character Howard Roark, an innovative architect whose uncompromising vision leads him to destroy a federal housing project constructed on an altered version of his plans, that drove the novel. Defending the creative capacities of the "active man" over and against the "passive man" who escapes personal responsibility through a blind devotion to the moral codes of others, Rand tapped into a growing

discourse about the dangers of mass conformity. According to Rand, "if [man] is to succeed at the task of survival, if his actions are not to be aimed at his own destruction, man has to choose his course, his goals, his values in the context and terms of a lifetime" (Rand 26). Stressing that "man has to be a man by choice" (27), Rand attempted to reconstruct an individualism (and masculinity) that many had deemed lost.

Using such language, Ditko followed Rand's self-described style of "romantic realism," depicting characters that, as Rand once explained, "are all black or all white, never grey" (Kobler 100) and that emerge in a larger than life way from the realistic background in which they operate. From the beginning Spider-Man's strong sense of individuality drives the storyline. As the series developed, Ditko transformed the mild-mannered Peter into an arrogant young adult reminiscent of Howard Roark from *The Fountainhead*. In one episode Peter pushes Betty's boyfriend, exclaiming that he "is sick of people trying to tell [him] what to do" (*#32* 3). Under Ditko's pen, Peter is no longer bespectacled and no longer physically frail; instead he is now "manly-looking" and "confident" (*#36* 14). Moreover, Peter mocks his classmates for their self-indulgent behavior, claiming that he "never was much of a conformist" (*#33* 9). As Spider-Man, Peter also accomplishes tremendous feats, including Ditko's famous rendering in *The Amazing Spider-Man #33* of Spider-Man's dramatic physical escape from beneath tons of fallen steel, proving that he is "worthy" of the power bestowed upon him. This rugged individualism, in a manner similar to the Hulk, assures against Peter's reconciliation with the world around him. Like many Marvel heroes before him, Peter is involved in many romantic entanglements but is unable to reconcile his adventurous life with the demands of women such as Betty who want "a man who has a good steady job—who comes home each night, to his pipe, and his paper—and to [her]" (*#30* 9). As Stan Lee editorializes at the end of one issue, although Betty and Peter may love each other, they are "tragically kept apart by the mysterious, ever-present figure whom the world knows only as Spider-Man" (*#33* 9).

The Appeal of the Marvel Universe

With *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel had found its voice and the comic book became the franchise's signature symbol. Like the Hulk

before him, Spider-Man was an alienated hero, never receiving the accolades or praise he deserved. In part, his neurotic condition seemed less the result of his own personal failings and more the result of a world that refused to acknowledge the authenticity of the individual. By the early 1960s this message began to make sense to a rising group of young adults who were becoming politically conscious. Marvel's meditations on the organization man, the scientific-military establishment, and the dangers of conformity echoed a burgeoning critique of America by radicals such as Tom Hayden and Paul Goodman. It was not surprising that in the early years the offices at Marvel received letters from college students at over 225 different schools. In fact, Lee soon began traveling the country, speaking at colleges and universities. For example, he was invited by the Princeton Debating Society to give a talk in a lecture series that also included Herbert Humphrey and William Scranton. *Esquire* magazine reported in a 1966 article that fifty thousand college students had joined the Merry Marvel Marching Society and that so many T-shirts had been sold that Marvel had run out of adult sizes ("What Did" 115). According to Lee, one undergraduate explained to him that college students "think of Marvel Comics as 20th-century mythology and [Lee] as this generation's Homer" (Braun 32).

The irony is that an industry that was forced in the 1950s to alter its content for fear that comics were corrupting America's youth ended up "corrupting" them in even more unforeseen ways. In a 1965 poll, student radicals in California named, alongside figures such as Bob Dylan and Fidel Castro, both Spider-Man and the Hulk as two of their favorite icons ("28 People" 97). Of course the superheroes at Marvel remained committed to the Cold War long after many of their readers had taken to the streets to protest the war in Vietnam. But to youth fighting a cultural and political war against "the one-dimensional man" of the Cold War order, the alienated but confident heroes of Marvel comics served as emblems of an authentic subjectivity deemed lost, expressing the existential anguish of a generation growing up under the threat of nuclear catastrophe. As an undergraduate at Stanford University explained in 1966, "Spider-Man, my favorite, exemplifies the poor college student, beset by woes, money problems, and the question of existence. In short, he is one of us" ("What" 117). To quote Stan Lee, enough said.

NOTES

1. On the history of Marvel comics, see Daniels, *Marvel*; Sanderson, *The Marvel Universe*; Lee, *Origins*; and Wright, *Comic Book Nation*.
2. For details of Stan Lee's career, see his autobiography *Excelsior*.
3. The history of the postwar comic book controversy is detailed in Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*.
4. On the entrance of psychoanalysis into American discourse, see Hale, *Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis*.
5. On the postwar crisis in American masculinity, see Cohan, *Masked Men*; Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety"; Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*; and Kimmel, *Manhood in America*.
6. This historical transformation is detailed in Galison and Hevly, *Big Science*; Kevles, "Cold War and Hot Physics"; Leslie, *Cold War and American Science*; and Sapolsky, "Academic Science."
7. Ditko's interest in the philosophy of Ayn Rand is documented in Raphael, "Spider-Man's Long Lost Parent"; and Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 311.

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