FIVE

There can be little doubt, among scholars at least, that Milton, Spenser, and the *scop* of *Beowulf* believed that their epics were relevant to their times, and in the case of Milton certainly, Spenser probably, and the Anglo-Saxon poet possibly, relevant for all time. While the intentions and assumptions of the creators of pop romance may be less evident, there can be little doubt that a part of the vast popularity their efforts enjoy must be due to the special kinds of relevancy that they have for their audiences. If the present generation of students is to be introduced to *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* mainly because of their esthetic and historical importance, that introduction may be facilitated and perhaps even enriched if these students can be brought to recognize that our western values have persisted remarkably down through the ages to even the present time through a variety of literary forms and through diverse media; that on this level alone the great English epics can speak to them and to their condition; and that they can speak in language and in modes to which the popular forms so familiar to them sometimes aspire, but seldom achieve.

NOTES

1. W. R. Robinson, "The Movies, Too, Will Make You Free," *Man and the Movies*, ed. W. R. Robinson (Baton Rouge, LA, 1967), 117–18.
2. Quoted in Jim Harmon, *The Great Radio Heroes* (Garden City, NY, 1967), 203.
3. Quoted in Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York, 1965), 26.
4. Quoted in David Manning White and Robert Abel, "Comic Strips and American Culture," *The Funnies: An American Idiom*, eds. David Manning White and Robert Abel (New York, 1963), 33.
5. Feiffer, 19.
6. Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York, 1968), 74–75.
7. Holland, xiii–xiv; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 103, 116–17.
8. "Our Serious Comics," *The Funnies*, 109.
9. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. ed. M.H. Abrams, rev. ed. (New York, 1968), 1, 3.
10. Heinz Politzer, "From Little Nemo to Li'l Abner," *The Funnies*, 51.

Masked Heroes

RICHARD REYNOLDS

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BATMAN, SUPERMAN, SPIDER-MAN, AND WONDER WOMAN ARE AMONG THE most widely known fictional characters ever conceived. Created as comic-book heroes, they remain more widely known through television, the movies and (in the case of Batman and Superman) through a vigorous presence in American and European popular culture that ensures their recognition by millions who have never read a Batman comic or seen a Superman film. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman' have remained continuously in print and involved in an unbroken sequence of new adventures for over fifty years [now seventy—*eds.*]. Yet the medium from which they spring—the 6" x 9" four-color comic book—continues to be (at least in North American and British culture) a marginalized channel of communication held by many to be an irredeemably corrupt and corrupting form of discourse, or else suitable only for children and the semi-literate.

In consequence, the adult superhero readership (a sub-section of the adult comic readership as a whole) has come to identify itself as a small and very cohesive subculture. Specialist comic-book retailers, "marts," and full-scale conventions are the outward signs of this cohesion, as is the highly organized marketplace for buying, selling, and collecting old comics. If connoisseurship and value to the collector alone gave access to the privileged world of high culture, superhero comics would have been there long ago.

For the cultural student, superhero comics present a number of immediate paradoxes: a popular art form traditionally known for its apparently hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts; a publishing genre which began to gain a degree of cultural respectability by ducking "underground" at least partially for its distribution; an art-form which has been handled (if at all) with disdain by the literary establishment, and yet has built up its own lively and heuristic critical discourse through what is still rather misleadingly

known as the "fan press";[2] and, finally, a body of contemporary mythology from which television and Hollywood have plundered material as diverse as the campy 1960s Batman TV show, the apparent artlessness of the Christopher Reeve Superman cycle, and the overwrought gothic bravura of the 1989 Batman movie.

The superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership—often to the exasperation of writers and artists, many of whom have proclaimed it to be a worn-out formula from as long ago as the 1970s. But the dinosaur refuses to keel over and die, and dominates the economics of the American comics industry. The chief superhero characters remain its most widely understood and recognized creations—to the annoyance of writers and artists who would like to bring the wider possibilities of the comic book (or graphic novel)[3] to the attention of the general public.

An attempt to define the limits of the genre can best be made as part of a broader exploration of the heroes themselves—differing as they do from each other sometimes as much as Gandhi and the Lone Ranger. The costumed superhero burst into seemingly fully fledged existence in June 1938, with the appearance on American newsstands of *Action Comics* #1, featuring Superman's first ever appearance in print. The new arrival proved enormously popular, and quickly led to a host of imitations and new ideas along similar lines—from Batman, Wonder Woman, and the Sub-Mariner—all with us to this day—to such obscure creations as The Arrow, Shock Gibson, and the Masked Marvel.[4]

America's entry into World War Two gave the superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and supplied a complete working rationale and worldview for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America.[5] This so-called Golden Age[6] of comics and superhero comics in particular lasted up to the late 1940s, when the bulk of the costumed superhero titles folded as a result of falling readerships. Only Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman came through the lean years of the early 1950s without a break in publication. The spotlight had shifted elsewhere—to crime comics, western comics, horror comics.

As is well known, it was the excesses of the horror comics that led indirectly to the renaissance of the superhero genre. The bloody guts and gore of Entertaining Comics'[7] *Tales from the Crypt*, *Vault* of *Horror*,[8] and other titles both from EC and rival publishers led to the censorious publication *Seduction of the Innocent*[9] by Dr. Fredric Wertham and the 1954 Congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency and comics.[10] [While Reynolds understandably stresses the notoriety of EC and other horror comics, it should be noted that objections to comic books predated the horror boom of the early fifties, and indeed predated Wertham.—*eds.*] The comic publishers responded to the adverse publicity of the report and the hearings with the self-censoring Comics Code. The Code involved a voluntary ban by the publishers themselves on violence, explicit sex, gratuitous gore, and the triumph of evil or antisocial behavior. In a move against the "true crime" comics that had peaked in popularity in the late 1940s, the Code stipulated that law enforcement officers should never be shown in a disrespectful or unsympathetic light.

Clearly, the climate had changed. Detective Comics (DC) decided to expand their small list of superhero comics that had, in the early 1950s, shrunk to no more than Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. A re-born and re-costumed Flash (1956)[11] paved the way for the return of the Green Lantern (1959),[12] a new heroine, Supergirl (1959),[13] and then a whole superhero team in the shape of the Justice League of America (1960).[14] Under the editorship of Stan Lee, Marvel Comics re-entered the superhero market with new titles such as *The Fantastic Four* (1961),[15] *Spider-Man* (1963),[16] and the *X-Men* (1964).[17] Norse Gods were added to the genre with *The Mighty Thor*,[18] and horror wedded to the superhero format in *The Incredible Hulk*.[19] Golden Age characters such as Captain America and the Sub-Mariner were brought back out of retirement.[20]

This is the period usually referred to as the Silver Age, dating from the revival of The Flash in 1956. Marvel dominated the scene in the 1960s and early 1970s, its writers and artists creating a wealth of exciting new titles that mixed protagonists more in tune with the mores of the period, and kept an eye for the visual and verbal ironies inherent in situating superpowered characters against a background that purported to represent the "real" world. It was the Marvel line of this period which first began the expansion of comics into a teenage and college readership. DC, however, remained the leading publisher of superhero comics in terms of sales, benefiting from the enormous appeal of the 1960s Batman TV series. Batman and Superman titles made up nine of the ten best-selling comics in the U.S.A. by 1969. DC also developed innovative titles of its own, such as the Green Lantern/Green Arrow team-up of the early 1970s, which featured artwork by exciting new talent Neal Adams.[21] [Adams was not quite new to comic books, having begun working for DC in 1967—and he made his debut as a comic strip artist with *Ben Casey* in 1962.—*eds.*]

But by the 1980s, the Marvel phenomenon had gone stale. DC reasserted itself as the leading comic book publisher, by means of a shrewd and imaginative revamping of its classic titles, and the promoting of exciting and innovative work both in the superhero genre (such as *Watchmen*) and in the linked genres of fantasy and horror, with titles such as *Hellblazer*. By the mid-1980s the Comics Code, once a force powerful enough to bring even EC's William Gaines to heel, had become a spent force, with both Marvel and DC insouciantly advertising many of their comics as "Suggested for Mature

Readers." Such confidence in the labeling bespoke the strength of their adult readership. There is currently a feeling amongst some comic publishers that the "adult" trend may have gone too far, and that comics may be running the risk of provoking another Wertham-like backlash against explicit violence and sexuality.[22]

Superman, the first superhero, was conceived by the teenage Jerry Siegel as early as 1934, lying sleepless one night in bed:

> I am lying in bed counting the sheep when all of the sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so. I hop right out of bed and write this down, and then I go back and think some more for about two hours and get up again and write that down. This goes on all night at two-hour intervals, until in the morning I have a complete script.[23]

But the concept of a character with superhuman strength and invulnerability was simply too unfamiliar for the comic book publishers of the early 1930s. Siegel and artist Joe Shuster established themselves in the comics business with the private-eye strip "Slam Bradley" (1934). Superman finally made his debut in *Action Comics* #1 (1938),[24] using material hastily adapted by Siegel and Shuster from a story which had originally been intended to form part of a newspaper strip.

Superman's arrival created a wholly new genre out of a very diverse set of materials. Today, many aspects of the first Superman story and its narrative approach have the appearance of cliché: it is necessary to keep in mind that the origin of what later became clichés lies right here.

Page one introduces the reader to the dying planet Krypton (unnamed) and explains that "a scientist" has placed his infant son in a spaceship, launching it towards earth. The "sleeping babe" is discovered and grows up in an orphanage (Clark Kent's parents in Smallville are a later addition to the mythology). On reaching maturity, the young man discovers that he can "leap ⅛th of a mile, hurdle a twenty story building . . . raise tremendous weights . . . run faster than an express train. . . ."[25]

Moreover "nothing less than a bursting shell" can penetrate his skin. Considerable powers, though modest when compared with the godlike abilities Superman would acquire later in his career. Clark decides to dedicate his strength to the benefit of mankind and elects to assume the identity of Superman—all this in the first page of the story, which concludes with a "scientific" explanation of Clark's superhuman abilities, comparing his strength with the proportionate strength of ants and grasshoppers. Pure hokum, but anticipating by twenty-five years Stan Lee's Spider-Man and that character's "proportionate strength of a spider."

Pages two to four relate how Superman prevents an innocent woman going to the electric chair. On page five Clark gets an assignment from the (unnamed) editor of the paper that employs him, the *Daily Star* (later to be renamed the *Daily Planet*):

> "Did you ever hear of Superman?"
> "What?"
> "Reports have been streaming in that a fellow with gigantic strength named Superman actually exists. I'm making it your steady assignment to cover these reports. Think you can handle it, Kent?"
> "Listen Chief, if I can't find out anything about that Superman, no one can!"[26]

Pages five and six see Superman intervene in a wife beating ("You're not fighting a woman now!"). Next, Clark encounters his smart and stylish colleague Lois Lane ("What do you say to a . . . er . . . date tonight, Lois?" "I suppose I'll give you a break . . . for a change"). At the roadhouse, however, Clark is hustled away from his date by brawling Butch Matson, who has nothing but contempt for Clark's pacifist attitudes ("Fight . . . you weak livered polecat!" "Really, I have no desire to do so!").

Lois leaves the club in disgust, but finds herself bundled into Matson's car. But even as they hustle their captive away, Matson and his cronies find the road blocked by the imposing figure of Superman, who tips both Lois and the roughnecks out of the car and then trashes the automobile, in a panel which also provides the subject matter for the comic's famous car-throwing cover. Superman carries Lois to safety, and on page ten we find her telling the *Daily Star's* editor of her meeting with the Man of Steel. Clark in the meantime has been given an assignment to visit the South American republic of San Monte to stir up news for the *Star's* front page. Instead, he travels to Washington DC to investigate a case of corruption in the U.S. Senate ("The bill will be passed before its full implications are realized. Before any remedial steps can be taken, our country will be embroiled with Europe"). A cliffhanger has Superman and the captured foreign agent failing to complete a leap between two adjacent skyscrapers.

Much that would become central to the superhero genre is established in these thirteen pages. As a first step towards a definition of the superhero, some of the features of the story could be listed as follows:

1. *Lost parents*

A key preoccupation. Superman is separated from his natural parents, and so his extraordinary powers are not represented in a straightforward parent-to-child relationship. Few superheroes enjoy uncomplicated relationships with parents who are regularly present in the narrative.

2. *The man-god*

The language of the story's first page mimics the King James Bible. A "passing motorist, discovering the sleeping babe within" echoes the Magi on the road to Bethlehem, or Moses among the Bulrushes—both clearly appropriate notes to strike. The sky-spanning spaceship crashes into the Earth, leaving—in later versions of the myth, at least—a deep gash in the soil. So Superman is born from a marriage of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth). In due course, Superman will acquire his Father on Earth (Kent senior) to go with Jor-El of Krypton, his Father in Heaven.

3. *Justice*

Superman's devotion to those in need involves coming to the help of those victimized by a blind though well-intentioned state. Superman's first ever exploit involves breaking into the State Governor's bedroom in order to save an innocent woman from the electric chair. Superman does, however, leave the real murderer bound and gagged on the Governor's lawn.[27]

4. *The normal and the superpowered*

The momentary (illusory) power of the individual who threatens the superhero with a gun, knife, or speeding car leads with deliberate inevitability to the astonished realization of the superhero's invulnerability. This is a note that most superhero stories strike from time to time, lest the contrast between superpowered hero and the average individual becomes lost—and the sense of wonder blunted by showing nothing but superpowered characters slugging it out with each other.

Page three of *Action Comics* #1 includes a fine use of this contrast linked to the structure of the panels and the necessity of turning the page to follow the story. The final panel of page three shows the Governor's butler firing a revolver at Superman from point blank range. Page four, panel one, shows an unharmed Superman reaching out to grab the revolver.

5. *The secret identity*

Why doesn't Clark let Lois know that he's Superman? The discourse of the story, the soap-opera continuity that investigates the Clark/Lois/Superman triangle, would be shattered if Lois were to realize Clark and Superman's unity. The Clark/Superman duality needs a constant supply of new dramatic situations to reveal new facets of the hero's split personality. The explicit reasons given within the story—such as "they could use my friends to get at me," reasons which have become common throughout the genre and do not need to be spelt out when establishing a new character—are only secondary to the structural need for characters to have secret identities.

This first-ever Superman story establishes the convention by using it as if it already existed. The reader is called upon to adduce adequate reasons for the disguise. And Lois's extreme scorn for the "morning-after" Clark establishes the width of the Clark/Superman gulf by way of a one-sided conversation:

> I'm sorry about last night—
> please don't be angry with me.[28]

But Lois coldly stares in the opposite direction. She has become a different person from the warm and yielding individual Superman held in his arms just two panels before: panels which occupy opposite ends of a three-panel sequence in the center of the page. The visual distance between Superman and Lois in the left-hand panel is similar to the distance that separates them on the right, but the emotional relationships implied by the figures are wholly different.

What has been established is in the nature of a taboo. Refraining from a certain act (in this case, revealing oneself to be Superman) wards off a potential disaster. Illogical perhaps, but the situation strengthens the appeal of our hero by establishing certain specific restraints which are peculiar to him and him alone. He pays for his great powers by the observance of this taboo of secrecy—in a manner which is analogous to the process in which warriors in many traditional societies "pay" for their strength in battle by abstaining from sex, eating special foods, and other taboos designed to isolate and protect the "masculine" in their characters.[29] Such concern with what amount to the rites of passage from adolescence to manhood is clearly of interest and concern to a teenage audience.

6. *Superpowers and politics*

The theme of restraint and limitation leads rather nicely to the question of the superheroes and the politicians. In fact, this theme is only lightly touched on

in *Action Comics* #1. All that is established is Superman's ability (and willingness) to act clandestinely and even illegally if he believes that national interests may be at stake. His loyalty and patriotism are above even his devotion to the law. This entails some important consequences for a superhero such as Superman, who is beyond the power of the armed forces, should he choose to oppose state power. Endless story possibilities can be designed around the theme of the superhero wrestling with his conscience over which order should be followed—moral or political, temporal or divine.

7. Science as magic

This feature is fundamental to the nature of the universe that the superhero comic portrays. Science is treated as a special form of magic, capable of both good and evil. Scientific concepts and terms are introduced freely into plots and used to create atmosphere and add background detail to artwork—but the science itself is at most only superficially plausible, often less so, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational. Explicitly "magic" powers are able to coexist quite comfortably with apparently scientific ones. A good example of this is the partnership between Iron Man (science) and Thor (magic) developed over the years in Marvel's *Avengers* title.

Although further removed from the character of the heroes themselves than the other points raised above, the depiction of science as magic is crucial to the way in which the superhero comic mythologizes certain aspects of the society it addresses.

These seven headings can be pulled together to construct a first-stage working definition of the superhero genre; a definition that at least has the authenticity of being constructed from the motifs of the first ever superhero comic.

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.

6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and myth indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.

Turning some of these laws on their heads, such as three and six, would give us a good working definition of the superhero's opponent, the supervillain. Such characters are implicit in the set of governing codes supplied to Superman in his first ever appearance, although they did not become a regular feature of superhero comics until around 1940.[30]

The early Superman stories were a resounding success. Readers asked for more of "that magazine with Superman in it." Publisher Harry Donenfeld—initially skeptical—realized that he had a phenomenal success on his hands. The superhero market boomed. By 1942, several dozen superhero titles were on the American market, forming the largest share of the 150-odd individual comic book titles on sale. Some were blatant copies of Superman: a lawsuit killed Fox Features' Wonderman, and another case was soon outstanding against Fawcett's Captain Marvel.[31] Other characters only derived from the Superman model in the most generic way: famous heroes already well-established included Batman, the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner, Captain America, Hawkman, Wonder Woman, and the Green Lantern.[32] The new medium had created a new genre all its own, and one perfectly suited to the comic-book's ability to create unfettered fantasy at a price that even children could afford. Moreover, the idealistic but law-abiding superheroes fitted the mood of a United States about to go to war against the fascist powers.

Budgetary considerations make the superhero particularly suitable for the comics medium. Parallels can be drawn between the comic book and the cinema, but in one respect the two media are totally unalike. Film is an expensive art form. Budgets for feature films today rarely go lower than $4 million—they may go as high as $50 million or more. Comics are cheaper, and they are cheaper just where the cinema is most expensive. It costs DC comics no more to have John Byrne draw Superman replacing a space-station in orbit or bathing on the surface of a star, than to show Clark Kent crossing the street on his way to the office. Clearly, any film producer has a much tougher and tightly constrained set of choices to make about a project which may be perfectly sound when viewed simply from the angle of character and plot development.

The comic artist develops a familiarity, indeed almost a casual ease, in handling extraordinary and exotic locations. Such scenes can be casually introduced, for a few panels only, or a bewildering variety of settings can be made

use of in one story, if required. The film producer, having decided to let his director build one or two expensive sets, is more or less obliged to "shoot the money"—i.e. to make all this costly set-building pay off as part of the climactic action of the movie. Often this presents no insoluble problems, but it remains an additional pressure on story structure from which the comic-book artist-writer team remains refreshingly free.

Superman and the superhero emerged at the end of the Great Depression and during the run-up to the outbreak of the European war. Millions of Americans had experienced poverty and unemployment; millions more had had their faith in the notion of uninterrupted economic progress seriously undermined. Avenging Lone Wolf heroes abounded in popular narrative of the 1930s and 1940s on both sides of the Atlantic: from Doc Savage to Philip Marlowe, from Hannay in Hitchcock's *39 Steps* to the Green Hornet, from Rick Blain in *Casablanca* to Captain Midnight of the radio serials.[33] A new kind of popular hero had emerged: the self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from many of the humdrum concerns of society, yet is able to operate according to his own code of honor, to take on the world on his own terms, and win. For Americans, the historical path from Munich to Pearl Harbor coincides with the emergence of Superman and Captain America—solitary but socialized heroes, who engage in battle from time to time as proxies of U.S. foreign policy. A darker side of the Lone Wolf hero is embodied by the Batman, a hero whose motivations and emotions are turned inward against the evils within society, and even the social and psychological roots of crime itself. The tension between these two veins in the superhero tradition remains to the present day.

The locus of superhero comics was then, as it largely remains, New York. Writers and artists living in the city depict it in their work—so successfully that superhero stories set in any other city may require a certain degree of justification for their choice of locale. The New York of the early 1940s was a place seemingly chosen for the preservation of the values of European civilization, and a destination for large numbers of artists and intellectuals seeking refuge from the Nazi conquest of Europe: Auden, Isherwood, Ernst, Tanguy, Mondrian. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss described his reactions on arriving in the city in the essay "New York in 1941":

> The French surrealists and their friends settled in Greenwich Village, where, just a few subway stops from Times Square, one could still lodge—just as in Balzac's time—in a small two- or three-story house with a tiny garden in back. A few days after my arrival, when visiting Yves Tanguy, I discovered and immediately rented, on the street where he lived, a studio whose windows faced a neglected garden. You reached it by way of a long basement corridor leading to a private stairway in the rear of a red-brick house. . . . Just two or three years ago, I learned that Claude Shannon had also lived there, but on an upper story and facing the street. Only a few yards apart, he was creating cybernetics and I was writing *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Actually, we had a mutual friend in the house, a young woman, and I recall that, without mentioning his name, she once spoke to me about one of our neighbors, who, she explained, was busy "inventing an artificial brain."
>
> If I did not have it now before my eyes, it would be hard to believe that I bought one day a sixteenth-century Tuscan sideboard for a few dollars. However, New York (and this is the source of its charm and its peculiar fascination) was then a city where anything seemed possible. Like the urban fabric, the social and cultural fabric was riddled with holes. All you had to do was pick one and slip through if, like Alice, you wanted to get to the other side of the looking glass and find worlds so enchanting that they seemed unreal.[34]

This is the New York (or Gotham City, or Metropolis) that dominates the superhero story and has become its almost inevitable milieu. New York draws together an impressive wealth of signs, all of which the comic-reader (of the 1940s or the 1990s) is adept at deciphering. It is a city that signifies all cities, and, more specifically, all modern cities, since the city itself is one of the signs of modernity. It is the place where—since the comedies of Terence—the author takes the reader in order that something may be made to happen. And New York has always been the great point of disembarkation in the history and mythology of the New World (although today, Ellis Island has been opened as a museum and migration now occurs through El Paso, Los Angeles, or Miami). New York is a sign in fictional discourse for the imminence of such possibilities—simultaneously a forest of urban signs and an endlessly wiped slate on which unlimited designs can be inscribed—cop shows, thrillers, comedies, "ethnic" movies such as *Mean Streets*, *Moonstruck*, or *Do The Right Thing*, and cyclical adventures of costumed heroes as diverse as Bob Kane's *Batman* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

Artists and characters might even rub shoulders with each other on Madison Avenue. Marvel under Stan Lee and Jim Shooter has often blurred the distinction between New York as fictional milieu and New York as publishing center—as in Doctor Doom's appearance in the Marvel offices in *Fantastic Four* #10, explaining his escape from a runaway meteor.[35]

Sometimes a thin disguise is the easiest way of summoning up an all-too-familiar subject. Batman writer Bill Finger describes the origin of a famous by-name in the following way:

> Originally, I was going to call Gotham City "Civic City." Then I tried Capital City, then Coast City. Then I flipped through the phone book and spotted the name Gotham Jewelers and said, "That's it, Gotham City." We didn't call it New York because we wanted anybody in any city to identify with it. Of course, Gotham is another name for New York.[36]

New York, however, couldn't be done away with so easily. The 1940 story "Batman and Robin visit the 1940 New York World's Fair"[37] is one of the earliest stories involving Robin, the Boy Wonder. The story commences with Bruce Wayne and his young ward Dick Grayson striding towards the Fair, taking in and being impressed by everything they see.

> Dick: Wow I heard it was big, but I didn't think it was this big!
> Bruce: Big is a mild word. It's stupendous . . . Look over there!—the trylon and the perisphere!
> Dick: Say, let's go inside the perisphere! . . . And see the city of tomorrow![38]

Clearly, it's appropriate that Bruce and Dick should spend their time keeping themselves abreast of the latest developments in technology, the better to prosecute their joint war against crime. Where better to do this than at New York's World's Fair? But the off-duty Caped Crusaders have barely begun their day of enjoyment when they are faced with an unwelcome interruption: a radio exhibit broadcasting the news that the great Westriver Bridge has just melted away "as if someone had played an acetylene torch upon it." Bruce and Dick leave the World's Fair to investigate—but without changing into their costumes.

Wayne visits Commissioner Gordon and quizzes him about the bridge. While he's in the Commissioner's office, a Mr. Travers of Travers Engineering arrives carrying a blackmail note that threatens destruction of a second bridge unless a ransom of $300,000 is paid. Commissioner Gordon advises Travers to ignore the threat—"Probably a crackpot trying to cash in on easy money." Meanwhile, Dick inspects the site of the disaster. Two men attack a woman. Dick intervenes, only to be informed that both men are detectives—"Sure, we was takin' her to stir!" After the detectives have gone, Dick begins to have doubts. "Those men didn't act or talk like detectives! I wonder?"

Two days later, the Travers Bridge collapses as threatened. $500,000 is demanded—or a third bridge will be destroyed in the same way. This time, Batman and Robin sweep into action and surprise the hoods, who are positioning a box-like contraption on the bridge. As the duo examine the box, the young woman who Dick saved from the "detectives" reappears. She explains that the box is the work of her father, Doctor Vreekill, a scientist who has discovered a short-wave ray that can "decompose the elements that make up steel." He intends to use his invention to blackmail construction firms into paying protection money. His daughter tells Batman of her father's plans to "free some dangerous prisoners tonight at the state prison so that they may join his organization! Then he's going to destroy the half-finished Monarch building!" Batman and Robin foil the prisoners' escape, then race to the Monarch building site, where they battle more hoods, before flying the Batplane to Doctor Vreekill's laboratory.

> Who?
>
> The Batman . . . about to take you to jail!
>
> Jail? You'll never take me to jail! Never![39]

Vreekill electrocutes himself on some bare wires. "Well, he saved the state the job" is Batman's verdict. The story concludes with another Batman and Robin endorsement of New York's World Fair.

> It's got as many thrills as one of our adventures!
>
> And he's not kidding! If you want to see something that will not only educate you, but thrill you, by all means see the New York World's Fair.[40]

In its construction and organization, this text is typical of a certain kind of superhero narrative of the 1940s—historically, the period in which the genre was formulating rules and approaches which later artists and writers could obey or flout—but not ignore. The structure and preoccupations of this text are typical of the so-called Golden Age.

Batman and Robin expend considerable effort and risk themselves in unarmed combat against men with guns in defense of—what? One answer might be "law and order," but clearly a man and boy who have no official connection with the police force and operate in disguise and through the use of secret identities are not agents of the law in the same way as the heroes of (say) an Edgar Wallace novel. The splash page at the beginning of the story comments:

> Wealth, lust for power, these are the roots of evil that tend to plant themselves in man's heart and mind . . . crime, havoc and destruction, these are the fruits. Once again it remains for the Batman and Robin, the boy wonder, to pit their amazing skill against one who would become a king of crime . . . a king of evil. . . .[41]

These words are positioned over the image of an enthusiastic Bruce and Dick arriving at the World's Fair, symbolic of rational and utopian values. Crime erupts into this ordered environment, and—significantly—crime against the fabric of the city, undertaken through the misappliance of science: Vreekill's machine that can "decompose the elements that make up steel." Though not quite a supervillain, Vreekill's bald head and functional costume signify him clearly as a "mad scientist." There is no exploration of the psychology that leads Vreekill to use his discovery for the pursuit of crime:

> With my machine I can become the most powerful man in the world! I can hold it as a club over those who deal in steel constructions.[42]

This is clearly not a sociological view of the roots of crime. The mythology underlying the text is that of the Old Testament, and, most specifically, the Temptation and the Fall. Vreekill is a prototype for many "Fallen" characters which Batman and other superheroes have encountered through the years—the Joker, Two-Face, Lex Luthor, Doctor Doom, Magneto, Ozymandias. All are corrupted by power, and power in the particular form of knowledge. "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil," promises the serpent in Genesis. Barthes, in the essay "Myth Today"[43] and elsewhere, has highlighted many of the ways in which mythology can be used to represent culture as nature and thus "explain" as natural and inevitable many of the social and political structures of our society. "Batman and Robin visit the 1940 New York World's Fair" mythologizes the idea of crime, dramatizing the individual's criminal potential through the decisions taken from a position of power (i.e., knowledge). If history is to be understood as a progress toward Utopia, a significant tension can be adduced between superheroes (assisting this process) and villains (thwarting the Utopia builders, or "those who deal in steel constructions").

This mythologizing of the dangers of scientific knowledge is one of the mainstream currents of science fiction, from *Frankenstein* through to the famous Spock/McCoy reason/conscience conflict in *Star Trek* (a conflict which is spuriously resolved by the *deus ex machina* of Kirk's overarching "humanity," which embraces such contradictions and thereby resolves them). However, the more traditional split of knowledge and conscience that is signified by comic book supervillains cannot be so easily reconciled within the confines of the genre. A villain such as the Joker continues year after year, story after story, sabotaging the social order in an endless treadmill of destruction, which Batman struggles to control and contain.

Such would be the "preferred" reading of a text such as "The World's Fair." Clearly, a number of contradictory readings can be advanced. For example, certain oppositional readings identify with the personal exploitation of knowledge and power espoused by Dr. Vreekill. In an early superhero text such as this, however, the difference between the preferred and oppositional readings remains clear-cut. The weight of moral decisions and their preferred interpretation are clearly inscribed in the construction of the narrative. Kane's art signals moments of moral decision very precisely, often by the use of a circular panel framing the character or the character's head. This is a narrative device akin to a film director's "holding" on a close-up, but the tight circular story panel serves the additional function of breaking up the visual flow of the narrative, acting as a giant-sized full-stop.

Such visual punctuation abstracts the contents of the panel from their context, a process which is helped on its way by the absence of any detailed backgrounds—although the panel in which Bruce and Dick agree to investigate the first bridge collapse shows both figures against a schematized New York skyline, the city they have pledged themselves to defend. The central conflict of the story is resolved in two circular panels on the last page. They are placed one above the other, although separated in narrative space by the two intervening panels that form the left-hand side of the bottom row. The upper circular panel shows Vreekill in the act of grabbing at the bare electric wire, destroyed by the forces he intended to exploit. The lower panel shows the triumphant Bruce and Dick, delivering their final homily on the virtues of the World's Fair. The reader is invited to participate, along with the story's heroes, in the alliance of knowledge and social order that the narrative has made visible.

NOTES

1. Superman has been in continuous publication since 1938, Batman since 1939. Wonder Woman has been in continuous publication since 1941, barring a short hiatus in 1986–87.
2. *The Comics Journal*, edited since 1976 by Gary Groth, is the premier fan publication—its intellectual range and acuity of critical discourse are very impressive. *The New Comics* (Berkley Books, 1989) is a collection of interviews with notable artists and writers from the pages of the *Journal*.
3. When does a comic become a graphic novel? "The most useful distinction in comics is to be drawn between periodical and book-style publication. A periodical is comprised of issues, one of which always replaces the previous one. The title is continuous, but one issue always differs from another. A book is a publication in which the title and issue are the same. A new printing does not require abandoning the contents in favor of a new set. A graphic novel is a unified comic art form that exploits the relationship between the two: book and periodical" (Steve Edgell, private communication to the author, 1992).
4. Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27, 1939; Wonder Woman in *All Star Comics* #8, 1941; the Sub-Mariner in *Marvel Comics* #1, 1939. The Arrow first appeared in *Funny Pages* #21 (1938), Shock Gibson in *Speed Comics* (October 1939), and the Masked Marvel in *Keen Detective Funnies* #11 (1940).

5. Captain America first appeared in *Captain America Comics* #1 (1941). The story is reproduced in Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes.*
6. The Golden Age lasted from 1938 to 1949 [Reynolds's precise end-date here is not universally agreed upon—*eds.*]. The Silver Age is agreed as having begun in 1956; there is no agreed terminal date, but most would accept that it lasted until around 1967–70.
7. Plastic Man also survived the slump of the early fifties, but never cashed in on the new impetus of the Silver Age: publication ceased in 1956.
8. EC's major horror titles were *Vault of Horror, Haunt of Fear*, and *Crypt of Terror* (later *Tales from the Crypt*), all launched in 1950.
9. Although *Seduction of the Innocent* was published in 1954, Wertham had been campaigning against violence in comic books since the late forties. In 1948 he presided over a New York Department of Hospitals' symposium called "The Psychopathology of Comic Books."
10. The hearings took place as part of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the United States.
11. Flash reappeared in *Showcase* #4, October 1956. This date is usually regarded as the beginning of the Silver Age.
12. The Green Lantern returned in *Showcase* #22, October 1959.
13. Supergirl premiered in *Action Comics* #252, May 1959.
14. The Justice League of America first appeared in *The Brave and the Bold* #28, March 1960. The super-team acquired its own title in October 1960.
15. The Fantastic Four made their debut in *Fantastic Four* #1, November 1961.
16. Spider-Man made his first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, August 1962—the very last scheduled issue before this title was axed. *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 followed in March 1963.
17. The X-Men made their debut in *X-Men* #1, September 1963.
18. The Mighty Thor first appeared in *Journey into Mystery* #83, August 1962. In March 1966 the comic was retitled *The Mighty Thor*, though keeping the numbered sequence from the earlier title.
19. The Incredible Hulk burst on the scene in *The Incredible Hulk* #1, May 1962.
20. Captain America returned to action in *Avengers* #4, May 1964. The Sub-Mariner had resurfaced earlier, in *Fantastic Four* #4, May 1962.
21. The Neal Adams Green Lantern/Green Arrow sequence runs from *Green Lantern* #76 to #89.
22. See, for example, "Drawing the Line" by Buddy Saunders, *The Comics Journal* #138, 109–122.
23. Quoted in "The Man of Tomorrow and the Boys of Yesterday," by Dennis Dooley, from *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend!*, ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (Octavia Press, 1987), 26.
24. *Action Comics* #1 was cover-dated June 1938. This comic is reprinted in *The Smithsonian Book of Comic Book Comics*, ed. Michael Barrier and Martin Williams (Smithsonian Institution Press and Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 19–31. A very similar story appears in *Superman* #1, Summer 1939. This story is reproduced in Feiffer's *The Great Comic Book Heroes.*
25. *Action Comics* #1, page 1.
26. *Action Comics* #1, page 5.
27. *Action Comics* #1, page 4.
28. *Action Comics* #1, page 10.
29. See for example *The Golden Bough*, by Sir James Frazer (abridged ed., Macmillan, 1957), 277–279.
30. The first appearance of the Joker is in *Batman* #1, Spring 1940.
31. This long-running dispute eventually led to the cancellation of *Captain Marvel* and the whole Marvel Family line of comics in 1953. There have been several unsuccessful attempts to revive the original Captain Marvel since. Marvel Comics' Captain Marvel is a completely different character, who (paradoxically) was much closer in conception to Superman than Fawcett's character ever was.

32. By 1942, there were 143 different comic book titles being published in the United States, with an annual industry revenue of some fifteen million dollars.
33. Several of these characters have appeared in comic book form. Pulp hero Doc Savage appeared in his own comic in May 1940, when longtime Doc Savage publisher Street and Smith decided to enter the comic book market. The Green Hornet and Captain Midnight—both heroes of the radio serials—entered the comic medium in 1940 and 1942 respectively.
34. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar* (Peregrine, 1987), 259–260.
35. *Fantastic Four* #10, page 5.
36. Quoted in Bob Kane, *Batman & Me* (Eclipse Books, 1989), 44.
37. This was a special Batman edition by Kane and Finger, published in the 1940 issue of *New York World's Fair Comics*. The story is reprinted in Kane's *Batman & Me*, 58–70.
38. "New York World's Fair," p. 1.
39. "New York World's Fair," p. 13.
40. "New York World's Fair," p. 13.
41. "New York World's Fair," p. 1.
42. "New York World's Fair," p. 8.
43. Ronald Barthes, *Mythologies* (Hill and Wang, 1972), 109–159.