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Mythology and Superheroes

BY MARK DAVID NEVINS

This essay is an analysis of Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology *by Richard Reynolds (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), originally published in London by B. T. Batsford in 1992.*

Scholars and comics readers would and should welcome a careful, reflective, and critically sophisticated study of superhero comics in light of myth: how superhero comics represent a sort of modern mythological system; or how these comics fulfill the cultural needs or fill the cultural niche in America that myths do or have done in other cultures; or how superheroes can tell us interesting things about the people and society that produce them. Richard Reynolds' *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* offers nothing like such a study, either in the book's content or in its intellectual weight; the book is ultimately very disappointing for students of comics as well as for students of mythology, especially given the expectations raised by the title and back-cover blurb.

Rather than merely dismissing *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* as a poor study, however, I would like to put forward in this essay some constructive criticism on what a book on this topic might do, and how it might go about doing it. This in-depth criticism is offered for two reasons: first, because the study of comics is still a young field, and attempts such as Reynolds' should be encouraged if the field is to mature into a robust discipline; second, because a close analysis of Reynolds' work is the only way to show the book's strengths—Reynolds does have many good ideas, even if they go mostly undeveloped. My intent in this essay is to try to work with Reynolds' text in order to help build a sort of heuristic for fruitful discussion of superhero comics as myths or as a mythology. There is rich potential in the topic that Reynolds has chosen to address here, and it would be a shame if *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* were to be seen by its readers, or by scholars in allied fields, as the final statement on the subject of myth and the superhero comic.

Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology has three

(P. 25 is just cover of Book)

basic faults. First, it lacks any real scholarly or intellectual rigor. Second, it affects a *faux* scholarly veneer, dropping names of established scholars as well as jargon and buzzwords from current critical theory while betraying no evidence that the author has much studied or understands those thinkers or ideas. Third (and most alarming), the book exhibits no apparent structure, flow of argument, or sense of who its audience is: readers familiar with superhero comics will find far too much analysis-free plot summary, and scholars of literature or cultural studies will find little to take away in terms of useful theory, argument, or developed thought. Reynolds' book posits some interesting ideas, but it does not explore these ideas, nor does it relate them by means of any overarching thesis or underlying structure of argument. Any value *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* has is merely as a sort of unorganized catalogue of some of the interesting questions that one might raise about superhero comics and their place in American culture; the fact that the book does not explore any of these questions in much depth makes the reading of it, finally, a thoroughly frustrating experience.

It is no surprise that the concepts of "myth" and "mythology" seem to muddy the waters when applied to comics, since use of the term "myth" in common parlance is so unsystematic, and since scholars of myth, myth-theorists, and folklorists all remain divided about the kinds of texts the term "myth" should embrace. Any study of myth, then, must necessarily begin with a definition of terms. Reynolds never does define what he means by "myth" or "mythology," and therein lies his essential problem. While scholars of myth cannot agree on a definition, most would accept a classification scheme which distinguishes myth from, say, legends and folktales, wherein myths tend to deal with divine or immortal beings (who may or may not have dealings with humans), and with questions of origins and the essence of culture, whereas folktales and legends generally do not. Reynolds, however, seems to be unfamiliar with the problematics of defining myth and mythology, and uninterested in thinking about his terms and the bases of his argument.[1] To give the reader some sense of common ground and a fixed reference point for a discussion of superheroes as myth, Reynolds needs to take on the problematic question of what myth is, what myth does, and the role myth plays in any culture (even if that culture is merely the body of readers who enjoy superhero comics). The fact that *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* has no overview of the terms of its argument or the scope and essence of its thesis, or indeed any introduction at all, is an early warning sign of the book's deficiencies.

The problem with most attempts to discuss superheroes as mythology is that they tend to focus on surface and structural similarities, and fasten on superficial resemblances, at the expense of any significant deep analysis. The naive agenda of such discussions is to attempt to lend to the superhero comic some "validity" as an artform. Thus, we have seen innumerable arguments that the adventures of a given comic book superhero have much to do with the stories of the *Iliad, Odyssey, Beowulf,* or Arthurian romance. This kind of facile comparison is at best uninteresting, and at worst sophomoric—and the agenda that underlies most of these comparisons is entirely wrong-headed. On the other hand, a study of superhero comics as fulfilling some kind of myth-function in modern American society could be a very fruitful endeavor. Above and beyond superficial similarities between Superman and Herakles or Beowulf or Gilgamesh, what do these stories do for the societies that produced them? What role do they play? Why do they have such a widespread appeal, even when the audience knows that the stories they are hearing are not "true"? Reynolds glances at some of these questions, but *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* ultimately has no development of ideas, no probing exploration of important issues. While Reynolds has some interesting things to say near the book's end—for example, on the *X-Men, The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen*—these comments have little to do with the purported topic of his book (mythology), and at that late point in the game come as pleasant surprises and moments of lucidity in an otherwise tangled mess of potentially fascinating topics.

Eschewing any introduction or preface, Reynolds begins his book with Chapter One, "Masked Heroes," which begins with a good idea: modern superheroes have become "a body of contemporary mythology" (7). Just as mythologies in traditional cultures are not transmitted through a single text, superheroes are known to most modern people not in connection with any single text, but through movies, comic books and strips, and television shows (one thinks of Walter Ong's ideas about "secondary orality"). At this point the reader is keen for a deeper discussion of the nature of the superhero in modern society, but finds instead an abrupt shift to a close reading of the origin of Superman in *Action Comics* #1. Reynolds does well to point out that this particular story is also "the origin of what later become clichés" (10) of the superhero story, but the rest of his comments are essentially a shoddy appropriation of Joseph Campbell's idea of the eight-staged "monomyth" (a structure that Campbell

argues underlies all heroic stories) coupled with some loosely-applied principles of Russian formalism/structuralism—all to no obvious end. Positing an *ur*-myth or *ur*-text is by no means an original idea, and Reynolds is disingenuous in not being more forthcoming about his sources and influences—primarily Campbell. Indeed, some more significant discussion of Campbell would have been appreciated here, even though Campbell's work itself is not unproblematic for today's scholars of myth.

A bigger problem with Reynolds' argument about Action #1 is that he ignores other more obvious and more culturally interesting "sources" for the genesis of the American superhero: the *mythos* of the American West and American individualism that spawned such serialized forerunners of superheroes as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo stories, and the Horatio Alger tales; the pulp heroes (the debt Superman owes in both specific and general terms to Doc Savage, for example, is under-emphasized in every consideration of Superman that I have read); the Victorian idea of the hero or superman, which owes primarily to Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Carlyle; and Romantic ideas about the individual, shaped to American sensibilities by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Siegel and Shuster's Superman did not leap into being out of nothingness (or in a dream), as Reynolds paints it, even though that version of Superman's origin might make for good storytelling.

Above all, this first chapter exhibits the lack of structure and the underdevelopment of thought or argument that plagues the whole book, and glancing references to Eco, Campbell, and Frazer serve no purpose save to give an appearance of scholarly respectability. Reynolds segues, inexplicably, from his "working definition of the superhero genre" (17) into a consideration of the typical settings of superhero comics, and a confused discussion of the city (New York, Gotham City, Metropolis) as "sign" (19ff). Following next is a close reading of the 1940 special issue comic story "Batman and Robin Visit the 1940 World's Fair," but this close reading seems to have no connection to any of the issues Reynolds raises earlier in the chapter. Interesting ideas, such as "the partnership between Iron Man (science) and Thor (magic)" (16), are hinted at but not explored (Reynolds says he will return to this particular idea in Chapter Three, but never does so to any significant degree). At the end of the chapter, Reynolds turns to some intriguing points about why some characters with superpowers turn bad, that is, into "supervillains." This section would have profited much from a fuller discussion, as here Reynolds begins to get at some of the essential questions that any myth urges its audience to consider: What is good? What is evil? How should I act? Sadly, Reynolds fails to follow up on this opportunity to build a thesis or a theory.

Chapter Two, "Costumed Continuity," displays the same lack of structure and developed argument as the first chapter, while again, frustratingly, dropping interesting ideas that go unexplored. It begins with an unintelligible attempt to connect the semiotics of superhero costumes to Saussurean linguistics (26ff), and then jumps to a panel-by-panel close reading of a single page of *Iron Man* #108. While this page may indeed be "a fine example of superhero sequential art" (27), its connection to the argument at hand remains unclear.[2]

While his argument is fuzzy, what is entirely clear is that Reynolds himself has been thumbing through recent catalogues of Modern Language Association conferences, and is keen to drop terms from current trendy critical movements (note, for example, the obligatory mention of the "gaze" on page 37). Reynolds is eager to exploit the possibilities for a study of the fetishism of costume in superhero comics (and indeed superheroes would seem a topic much riper for such possibilities than Shakespeare or the Victorian novel, two fields that have seen attention to this topic in recent years), but he gives short shrift even to this juicy subject with a cursory glance at *Watchmen*, all the while offering the reader no sense that he has done any reading of psychoanalytic theory. Leaving the subject of costume fetishism undeveloped, Reynolds then jumps awkwardly to "good girl" art and its relationship to pornography (34ff). Throughout this chapter Reynolds quick-cuts from idea to idea like an MTV music video, an especially frustrating technique since this chapter lays out a smorgasbord of genuinely interesting topics. Whatever other faults he has, Reynolds seems to intuit quite accurately what the good questions are. Unfortunately, he also seems to have no idea how to go about exploring them, never mind answering them.

A problem throughout the book, Chapter Two's abuse of flavor-of-the-month scholarly jargon is particularly annoying (for example, the term "metatext" is misused on page 48). I am still not sure what to make of Reynolds' obscure claim that "superheroes are the protagonists of the myth which is constructed as an intertextual reading of their careers" (52) save that Reynolds seems to have had a nasty run-in with some poorly-translated French critical theory. Elsewhere, Reynolds argues that the Marvel and DC universes are really an example of intertextuality (38). The possibilities of this idea are intriguing:

it is a pity it is not developed here.

Reynolds is particularly interested in the idea of "continuity," a characteristic he cites as a hallmark of superhero comics. He draws a good analogy between the great pressure of conforming to continuity that is placed upon the authors of superhero stories ("Will this story contradict any detail, no matter how small, that has come before?") and Malory's systematizing of the wide tradition of Arthurian materials (48). Today's superhero writers are forced into the same systematizing role as Malory was, contending as they must with hundreds of previously-published stories that many readers show an alarming familiarity with, and in this conflation of history, audience expectations, and multiple versions of stories lies the core of a superb essay. Also, following up on Malory and Romance, a fuller discussion of narrative mode would have been welcome. Even though a bit old fashioned, Northrop Frye's discussion of Romance (in *Anatomy of Criticism*) would be worth Reynolds' consideration, particularly given the ways that some recent superhero comics attempt to undermine conventions of their genre that the reader assumes are static (that is, the ways some recent superhero writers try to create stories that subvert the mode of "romance" that we expect their superheroes to inhabit). Reynolds' claims regarding the protagonists and antagonists of the superhero story, and his assertion that the villain is "the true star of each story" (51) would also be interesting to compare to Frye's structure.

Elsewhere in this chapter, Reynolds conjures up the cultural critic Roland Barthes for no apparent reason (50), and Barthes' presence becomes troubling as the reader begins to imagine how apt a model Barthes might have been for Reynolds: Barthes is peerless in his use of pop culture artifacts to read the cultures that produce them. While Reynolds concludes this chapter with the assertion that the "myths [of the superhero] are everywhere touched on and excited by the individual [comic] stories" (52), we remain, now halfway through the book, no closer to understanding what Reynolds means by "myth," and how superhero comics are to be understood in the context of the cultures that create and enjoy them.

Chapter Three opens with a sentence that demonstrates that Reynolds has given no thought at all to what "myth" or "mythology" mean: "Just as other genres of comics have appropriated existing narrative mythologies (the Wild West, anthropomorphism, horror). . . ." (53) Though the Wild West might be considered an important part of some larger "Mythology of America," anthropomorphism and horror are, of course, decidedly not mythologies. This chapter, again, displays glimmers of interesting arguments, but as elsewhere these remain undeveloped and not tied to any larger developed thesis. Titled "Deciphering the Myths," this chapter is broken into shorter treatments of Thor, Superman, Batman, and "The New Middle Ages" (an idea taken from Umberto Eco), which, instead of acting together to provide a heuristic for reading superhero comics as mythology, instead are merely more ingredients in an uncooked intellectual stew. While Reynolds is compelling and original in his observations on the way that Thor and Norse mythology were readily graftable onto comics because superheroes had somehow made comics audiences familiar with the mode of myth, his sections on Superman and the Batman are for the most part "myth theory lite" and "psychology lite" that appropriate (and poorly apply) their best ideas from Campbell and Freud.

The high point of this chapter is the discussion of how the Batman's most interesting opponents seem to understand his mind, and are essentially like him or are mirror-images of him (see, for example, Alan Moore's story *The Killing Joke*); the idea is not a new one, but Reynolds handles it surprisingly well given the limited expectations one has by page

67 of this book. Chapter Three concludes with random free association between superheroes and American politics and ideology, satire, values, race, gender, and sexuality—all good topics, but frustratingly unexplored. Near the chapter's end, Reynolds asserts that "Like most important signs, the superhero supports a varied and contradictory battery of readings" (83). Granted, superheroes are multivalent signs, but Reynolds has brought us no closer to understanding what these signs represent, or how they work.

Chapter Four, "Three Key Texts," is again broken into parts, and here Reynolds is at his best, probably because a lack of a larger thesis is less troubling in the case of the close readings he undertakes in this chapter. Reynolds begins with a consideration of *X-Men* issues 108-143, and yet, astoundingly, he does little to discuss what may be one of the most self-conscious attempts in the history of superhero comics to emulate mythic content and structure. In addition to setting the dominant tone and style for superhero comics of the 1980s and 1990s Chris Claremont and John Byrne's run on *X-Men*, notably "The Dark Phoenix Saga," was an attempt to create a saga or cycle about a group of misunderstood heroes combating a culture-threatening menace in order to save their people. This narrative formula is, of course, the essential story underlying many of the most compelling western mythic stories (for example, *Gilgamesh*, the Norse *Eddas*, *Beowulf*, much of Graeco-Roman mythology). Reynolds instead spends most of the X-Men section discussing page layout. While his treatment of Byrne's "cinematic style" is the most lucid section in the book (he really does capture the essence of Byrne's appeal), such an analysis is entirely unrelated to the book's stated purpose. It is inconceivable that a work with the title *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* misses the chance to explore the so-obviously "mythic" things that Claremont and Byrne were trying to accomplish.

The other parts of this chapter focus on Frank Miller's revisionist *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' "deconstructive" *Watchmen*. Following a poorly-done account of "highbrow vs. lowbrow" marketing strategy (again, tangential at best to the chapter's presumable thesis), Reynolds offers a rather weak interpretation of *The Dark Knight Returns* as social criticism, and, additionally, misses Miller's own problematic arch-conservative biases, which pervade the work. Saying "Batman is a sign invested with so many layers of social meaning that each separate reversal of the use of that sign is an attention-grabbing narrative event" (103) sounds compelling, but Reynolds does not bring us any further along. To his credit, Reynolds does point out that the Batman at the end of *The Dark Knight Returns* is a very different man from the Bruce Wayne at the beginning. A serial comic book (or "Romance," to return to Frye's term) hero who changes fundamentally is indeed an innovation in superhero narrative (bringing Romance more into the realm of the novel), and the repercussions of this Miller story continue to affect even far less ambitious superhero tales a decade after its publication.

In the *Watchmen* section Reynolds shows a good understanding of this work's canny self-referentiality, and the way it both affirms and "deconstructs" the content and form of superhero comics; however, these issues are irrelevant to the ostensible subject of the book—superheroes as *myth*—and rather than writing on *Watchmen* here Reynolds might have done better to spend his time exploring Moore's post-Nietzschean ideas in the first sixteen issues of *Miracleman* (originally printed as *Marvelman* in the UK, in *Warrior* magazine). Had Reynolds' focus really been superheroes as modern mythic figures, a consideration of *Miracleman* (the basic premise of which is "What if superheroes *really* did exist?") could have been quite profitable.[3] While I am skeptical that "*Watchmen*'s so-called 'postmodernism' largely comprises this process of stripping away the accumulation of 50 years of continuity" (117), I am intrigued by Reynolds' claim that *Watchmen* is "a text which transcends the accumulated myths through which superhero texts are read" (117), and (as so often elsewhere) I wish he had fleshed out this claim with a fuller discussion, not to mention textual support.

Reynolds concludes Chapter Four by asserting that, like Alan Moore, comic readers as a whole are moving "away from the superhero" (118). The continuing popularity of fairly conventional superhero comics for younger generations would not seem to bear out this claim, but, granting for a moment that it is true, why is it true? Has the myth of the superhero reached its terminal point of usefulness for American culture? Will it be thoroughly reinvented? Or are we merely seeing a period of dormancy in the popularity in the traditional super heroic narrative such as the one witnessed after the Second World War, and, to a lesser extent, in the late 1960s and early '70s around the time of the "Underground" movement?

In conclusion, I should say that I really wanted to like this book, and I had high hopes for it; hopes which were, unfortunately, nearly completely unfulfilled. Nevertheless, there is a need for such a book as *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* might have

been. Reynolds raises many interesting questions and issues in his book (though perhaps not always intentionally), questions and issues well worth exploring. This work could have been a study of the mythic function of superheroes in today's society—do superhero comics hold the same cultural place that myth or religion once did? It could have been an exploration of the role that gods and heroes play in societies that do not believe in them—compare, for example, the uses to which late classical authors put Graeco-Roman myth.[4] Or this could have been a book about myth-making, and the cultural role superheroes play in contemporary American society.

How can the shortcomings of *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* be explained? In looking at comics writers, some of the best "deconstructors" of the superhero *mythos* are English: Alan Moore, in *Watchmen* and *Miracleman*; Grant Morrison, in *Zenith* and *Doom Patrol*; Peter Milligan, in *Shade, The Changing Man*; and, to a certain extent, Neil Gaiman, in *Sandman*. It is possible that the same cultural distance that has allowed these writers to craft their tales has hamstrung Reynolds, who is also English, and has caused him difficulty in assessing the place superhero comics really hold in and for American culture.

As it stands, and whatever the reasons, this book is not a success; it does not do what it claims it will do, and the text Reynolds gives us stands potentially to undermine an argument that superhero comics can be read in an interesting way, for themselves as cultural artifacts, or for what they can tell us about twentieth-century American society. In a way, Reynolds is guilty of the same sort of shameless huckstering that Stan Lee perpetrated in the 1960s, when, as editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, he glibly chanted, "Hey, Kids! Marvel comics are a modern mythology!"

Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology either needs to be re-thought, and given a central developed argument to unite its parts and address what it claims it will address, or else (and perhaps more congenial to the way Reynolds' mind seems to work) the book should have been a series of unrelated essays, since any number of the questions Reynolds raises could be the core of a superb essay. That this book came into being is a good sign, and a cause for optimism: perhaps we will see more books that attempt to study comics (superhero or "alternative") rigorously, either as an artform or as markers of culture. But for the foreseeable future, traditional scholars are going to have a difficult enough time looking upon comics scholarship seriously; we as students and scholars of the medium of comics ought not to not give them poorly conceived and carelessly executed books like this one as sticks to beat us with.

A few final practical matters: the edition I reviewed was the paperback one, and it was well-produced on good quality paper with a fine stitched binding. The book is relatively free of typographical errors, and the overall design is pleasing, though the cover design (a collage of comic covers) is rather amateurish, and adds little. The interior illustration quality is shockingly poor: illustrations are in black and white, and hover below the clarity and resolution of common photocopies. More problematically, almost all of the twenty-six illustrations are superfluous to the arguments Reynolds makes. Also, the wordless page from *Watchmen*, reproduced on page 31, has been inadvertently "flipped" (printed in mirror image). Reading the book would have been more enjoyable if information such as issue and page numbers of the comic book in question had been supplied parenthetically in the text (*Avengers* #149, p. 31), as is the common convention, rather than as awkward endnotes.

NOTES

1. One might expect a study of the kind that Reynolds says he is undertaking would show some significant grappling with the thoughts of Ernst Cassirer (e.g., *Mythical Thought*, the second volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) or Sir James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), or even early myth theorists like Otto Rank (*The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*) or Lord Raglan (*The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*). It seems to me that anyone writing about myth now must come to terms with David Doty's *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, but I grant that this is a very difficult work. I would recommend for non-specialists the easier but nevertheless superb collection of essays on myth edited by Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, especially those essays by William Bascom, Lauri Honko, G. S. Kirk, and Theodor H. Gaster. This list of works is offered not to browbeat Reynolds for his lack of research, but rather because these are some of the established important writings in the field that a scholarly reader interested in mythology might expect a book on that topic to exhibit some familiarity with, and, where appropriate, respond to.

2. Additionally, Reynolds could learn a thing or two about how to do comic page explication from Art Spiegelman. Spiegelman's "Commix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview" in *Print* 42:6 (Nov/Dec 1988) still stands as a primer in how to read comics narrative.

3. Jim Starlin's *Warlock* stories for Marvel, or the "Fourth World" stories that Jack Kirby did for DC, are ripe for analysis along the lines of superheroes and mythology, but these tales do not even merit a mention from Reynolds.

4. See G. S. Kirk's *The Nature of Greek Myths* for a superb discussion of this topic.