Chapter 5
The Prehistory of the Superhero: The Roots in Myth, Epic, and Legend

The Pre-Genre Stage

According to John Cawelti, "a formulaic pattern will be in existence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived of by its creators and audience as a genre" (*Adventure* 1976, 8). Before the Western film genre emerged, the formula existed in literary forms that laid out the trans-media Western genre's ideological parameters. The same can be said of other genres, whether discussing the journalistic or stage depictions of gangsters before the earliest film portrayals or the existence of literary conventions stretching backward in history. These links can typically only be established in hindsight. At some point certain motifs, icons, and themes come into existence that later play significant roles in the creation of a genre.[39] Before that preliminary point, only the primordial "roots" of a genre can be traced, but after that certain point and for a significant period of time the initial prototypes of a genre's conventions coalesce and are a part of other narrative forms and story genres. I designate the period before this point as the Proto Age; the myths, legends, and epics of this period serve as the roots for all the adventure meta-genres and contain the prototypes of all the heroes of the adventure meta-genre.

The Proto Age

The Proto Age stretches far back into mythological hero stories, which historically tend to follow stories of the cosmic creation and establishment of a pantheon of gods. These stories serve as a way of bridging the divide between the divine and the human. Heroes, particularly in classical mythology, serve as intermediaries between gods and humans, acting in and passing between the two worlds in the stories told about them. The link between mythological and legendary heroes and superheroes is clearly indicated by Jerry

Siegel's reminiscences about creating Superman: "All of a sudden it hits me. I conceive of a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so" (qtd. in Goulart, *Over* 1991, 74). The Golden Age Flash explicitly draws on the iconography of the Greek god Hermes with his winged helmet and boots.

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In his discussion of the origination of Thor, Stan Lee claims that he and a radio host had been discussing Marvel comics and the host "referred to them as a twentieth-century mythology" with "an entire contemporary mythos, a family of legends that might be handed down to future generations" (Lee, *Origins* 1974, 178).[40] Although the centrality of superheroes to modern life asserted here is greatly overstated, the stories told about them do have parallels to those of ancient mythologies. The surface similarities between superheroes and mythological heroes are several. A company's cast of superheroes can be seen as paralleling a culture's pantheon of gods and heroes, with similar parallels between their extraordinary powers and tales of adventure. The crossing of heroes and gods into each other's stories—e.g. Athena's presence in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Argonautica*—has a surface similarity to the continuity of comic book universes with crossovers, guest stars, and team-ups. Another surface similarity is the use of various characters by succeeding authors who retell stories and add to the mythos' continuity: Virgil's retelling of the Trojan War in the *Aeneid* or Frank Miller's retelling of Batman's early career in *Year One*.

Specific conventions of the superhero genre have definite roots in stories of mythological and legendary heroes, particularly in the epic poems that retell their tales. Samson's strength served directly

as inspiration for Superman's. His weakness, a haircut, may be an unacknowledged archetype for the vulnerabilities that afflict superheroes, such as kryptonite. Other mythological strongmen do not have such weaknesses because their strength is inborn and generally comes from a blood relationship with the divine, as Hercules is the son of Zeus for example. Samson has no such direct relationship with the god of the Israelites; the people of Israel keep a covenant with their god and are rewarded for staying faithful to it. Samson's covenant is that of the Nazarite, one who has separated "himself unto the Lord" and remained pure (Numbers 6:5). An element of this purity is growing one's hair and never cutting it. Delilah, a Philistine spy, learns this secret from Samson and shaves his locks while he sleeps, thus robbing him of his potency. Although the secret of Samson's strength resides in the maintenance of his Nazarite oath, the symbol of that oath, his hair, can be attacked by his enemies, just as the gravity rod of Starman can be stolen or Billy Batson's cry of "Shazam!" muffled.

An even older epic establishes the conventions of the hero and his sidekick, as well as the idea of transcendent, or super, powers being available to mortal beings. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of the semi-divine but mortal king of ancient Uruk, Gilgamesh, who defeats and befriends a monster-man, Enkidu, sent against his kingdom by the gods as a punishment for Gilgamesh's despotic and predatory rule. After Enkidu has a dream, he and Gilgamesh set out to fight Khumbaba the Strong, king and guardian of the Cedar Mountain, whom they defeat with the aid of the gods. Ishtar, goddess of love and war, tempts Gilgamesh to become her lover and husband, but he refuses, knowing the deadly result of surrendering to her love. To avenge her hurt, Ishtar strikes Enkidu with a grave and fatal illness. In fear of a similar death, Gilgamesh seeks the power of immortality but fails a test. Returned home, Gilgamesh learns of a plant growing at the bottom of the ocean that returns youth to the aged; he finds the magic plant but loses it on his journey home before he can devour it.[41]

Gilgamesh's story contains several elements of the superhero genre that are also common to other hero stories. Enkidu serves as Gilgamesh's sidekick just as Patroclus did for Achilles, Iolaus and Hylas for Hercules, and Robin for Batman. Enkidu also establishes the pattern of the outsider sidekick in a homoerotically charged

relationship with the hero. Leslie Fiedler defines this relationship as the "myth of the dark beloved" in "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey" (1955, 149). He finds an archetype of "mutual love of *a white man and a colored*" (146) running through American "*boys'* books," such as *Moby-Dick*, *Last of the Mohicans*, or *Huckleberry Finn* (original emphasis 144). The white hero-groom and his "colored" sidekick-bride—whether black, Indian, or Polynesian—are symbolically married. This "sacred marriage" expresses a way of overcoming "our unconfessed universal fear objectified in the writer's [alienated] status [...] that compelling anxiety [...] that we may not be loved, that we are loved for our possessions and not ourselves, that we are really—*alone*" because our "dark-skinned beloved will take us in [...] without rancor or the insult of forgiveness" (original emphasis 150). In his arms, we need not be forgiven our racism, "as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real*" (150). But our guilt cannot be so easily elided and the dark beloved must suffer or die "so that the final reconciliation may seem more believable and tender" (151). Fielder specifically links this homoerotic relationship to white America's racial iniquity: "Behind the white American's nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended" (151). This pattern clearly runs through American literature and popular culture finding expression in Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Jim, Hawkeye and Chingachgook, John Carter and Tars Tarkas, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

Although Fiedler's myth of the dark beloved may hold valid for white America, Enkidu's relationship with Gilgamesh belies the particularistic notion that the sacred marriage of the hero-groom and sidekick-bride is limited to American literature. Gilgamesh oversteps his bounds as king of Uruk by taking the city's sons for war and its daughters for love, and the gods answer the people's prayers by creating Enkidu, a monster-man, to teach the king a lesson. Like the "colored" men of American literature, Enkidu is a social outsider with deep connections to the natural world. Like them he is also figured as female, having "long hair like a woman's; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of corn," thus linking Enkidu to an image of female fertility (*Gilgamesh* 1972, 63). Gilgamesh emasculates the savage wildman by sending a harlot to

him to take his innocence, thus causing the wild beasts to reject him. This rejection weakens Enkidu, and he longs "for a comrade, for one who would understand his heart" (65). Gilgamesh is this soul mate. Gilgamesh feels a similar pull. He tells his mother Ninsun of a dream in which he finds a meteor that he cannot lift, but finds "its attraction was like the love of a woman"; in a second dream he feels drawn to an axe and "loved it like a woman and wore it at [his] side" (66, 67). Ninsun interprets these figures as the "strong comrade" whom Gilgamesh will love as a woman and never be forsaken by. The harlot dresses Enkidu in her own clothing and he "appeared like a bridegroom" (67), which is fitting because "Gilgamesh has gone into the marriage-house" in order to "celebrate marriage with the Queen of Love" (68). Enkidu comes to Uruk where "the bridal bed was made, fit for the goddess of love" and waits for Gilgamesh as the "bride waited for the bridegroom" (69). They meet, fight, and Gilgamesh defeats his monster-man, after which they "embraced and their friendship was sealed" (69).

Like so many sidekicks to come—whether Huck's Jim tormented by Tom Sawyer, Ishmael's Queequeg shivering with fever, Hawkeye's Chingachgook heartsick over the death of his son Uncas, Captain America's Bucky blown to bits by Baron Zemo's buzzbomb, or Batman's Robin (Jason Todd) murdered by the Joker—Enkidu sickens and dies, stricken by the scorned love-goddess Ishtar.[42] Gilgamesh laments his departed friend, weeping for a week and laying a veil on his corpse, "as one veils a bride" (95). The pattern identified by Fielder—excepting the racial guilt—of the hero and his beloved, suffering sidekick fits the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Other elements of the superhero genre are present in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. By rejecting marriage with Ishtar, Gilgamesh renounces sexual temptation, as do the Lone Ranger, Doc Savage, Superman, and many other adventure heroes following the principle of sexual segmentation described in *The American Monomyth*. Finally, Gilgamesh seeks transcendent power, the ability to transcend the physical limits of the mortal world. Superpowers perform this function. Flight surpasses gravity. Super strength defies the physics of mass ratios. Every superpower violates some fundamental law of physics just as Gilgamesh tries to violate the fundamental law of mortality.[43] Although he does not attain immortality, by pursuing it and encountering methods to achieve it, Gilgamesh in his epic helps

to establish the idea of transcending the physical limits of human life, an idea of freedom inherent in the superhero. The superhero is free from certain limitations—gravity, many of Newton's laws, certain aspects of responsibility—and thus serves as a dream of escape for his readers. Gilgamesh's dream—to escape the boundaries of mundane existence—is shared by the readers of superhero tales who can similarly escape such boundaries through identification with the superhero and his superpowers.

The epic hero often fights alone or with a companion, but occasionally teams up with others. The quest for the Golden Fleece, detailed in Apollonius of Rhodes' epic *The Argonautica*, can be seen as presaging the "showcase" superteams in comics, e.g. the Avengers or the Justice League, teams that bring together the greatest heroes of a culture or a company to form a team to accomplish a task or mission.[44] In the case of the Avengers and the Justice League, the heroes stay together as a team; the Argonauts disperse following the completion of their quest. Among the Argonauts can be found precursors of various superhero-types. Jason is the leader, analogous to Cyclops of the X-Men, Captain America of the Avengers, or Batman of the Justice League. The leader is not the strongest or most powerful hero, but the one whose strategies bring the team through to victory. Hercules is the "brick" of the team, the big strongman, like the Thing, the Beast, or the Hulk. With wings on their ankles, Calais and Zetes, the sons of Boreas the North Wind, remind a modern reader of the Sub-Mariner, but they prefigure more limited flying heroes like Hawkman or the Angel. Euphemus even duplicates one of the Flash's tricks—running on water—and one of the Scarlet Speedster's titles—"the fastest runner in the world" (Apollonius 1971, 40). Other mythic and legendary heroes' abilities prefigure other superpowers.[45]

The organization of the crew and its voyage parallel later superteams. When the Argo lands and the crew members are faced with an opponent, the appropriate Argonaut faces the threat. When Amycus, king of the Bebryces, demands that the sailors put forward a champion to box with him, as is his custom whenever strangers visit his kingdom, Pollux—later the patron god of boxing—takes his challenge and defeats the arrogant king. Winged Calais and Zetes free Phineus from the Harpies who raid and defile his table. Other heroes face the particular challenges that suit their specific abilities,

just as the Justice League splits up into teams to battle a menace or the members of the Legion of Super-Heroes take on a group of villains and each hero fights the villain appropriate to the superhero's power level.

In the Viking epic *Beowulf*, the hero is called by King Hrothgar to defeat the monstrous Grendel who besieges the Danish king's mead hall, Heorot. Grendel neatly prefigures the supervillain. As the supervillain is the inverted image of the superhero, so too is the outlaw Grendel the inverted image of the heroes of Heorot. Grendel lives a bitter and lonely exiled existence, jealous of the crowded warmth of the Danish feasting hall with its singing bards. His invulnerability and preternatural strength make him invincible against the attacks of Hrothgar's warriors, just as the supervillain's power defies the limited abilities of the authorities. He refuses to pay *wer-gild*, the man-price, for his murders, "offering no truce, accepting no settlement, no price in gold or land, and paying the living for one crime only with another," thus flouting and denying the norms of Viking society (*Beowulf* 1963, 28). When he makes feasting and fellowship impossible, Grendel conquers the world of the Danes and rules their mead hall.

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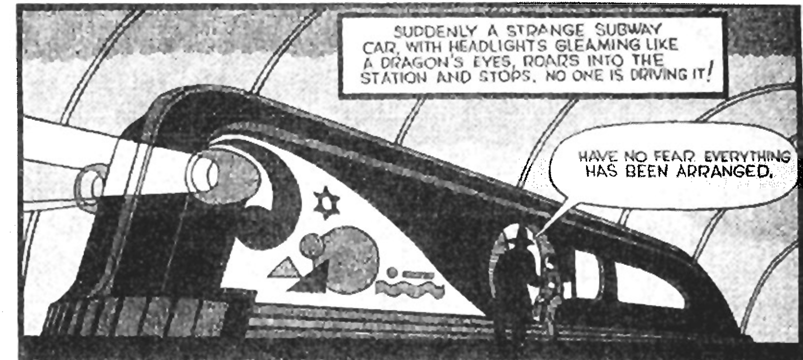
These epics also embody the story formulas endemic to superhero tales, the classical and American monomyths. The classical monomyth, identified by Joseph Campbell, clearly serves as a model for the origin stories of superheroes. The core of the monomyth is the separation-initiation-return structure. In Campbell's words, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men" (*Hero* 1968, 30). Both Gilgamesh and Jason enact this story formula (185-188, 203-204).



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Superhero origins follow this structure, the prototypical example being that of Captain Marvel in which Billy Batson is given the call to adventure, journeys underground via a mystic subway train to confront the elderly wizard Shazam, and returns to the surface streets with the powers of Captain Marvel, able to aid mankind.

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The American monomyth undergirds most American formulaic adventure narratives, running throughout the Western and other genres. Most superhero stories, especially the more formulaic tales, precisely fit the American monomyth structure. The basic version of the monomyth is:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisal

condition: the superhero then recedes
into obscurity (Jewett 1977, xx).

Interestingly, *Beowulf* basically fits this narrative structure. Hrothgar's orders Heorot to be built in a time of peace and plenty. His men feast there nightly. The evil outsider, Grendel, threatens this Danish paradise, and Hrothgar's warriors are helpless against the extraordinary threat of the monster. Beowulf arrives and, at great peril, kills Grendel and the monster's mother, restoring Heorot to its prior condition of peace. He then returns to Geatland, ultimately to rule there and to save his homeland from a dragon. The areas in which *Beowulf* differs from the American monomyth concern the hero's selflessness and his recession into obscurity. Beowulf arrives expecting both glory and treasure as rewards of his battle. The story follows Beowulf after he leaves Hrothgar's land and tells of Beowulf's own kingship, death, and burial barrow. With those provisos, it is clear that Beowulf's story matches the pattern of the American monomyth.[46]

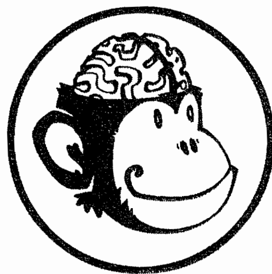
The superhero code, a primary element of the hero's mission, probably finds its cultural archetype in the stories of Robin Hood, the outlaw who rights wrongs. Robin Hood follows his own code, ignoring the law, but meteing out justice to the oppressors and alleviating the needs of the poor. Thus he especially serves as a model for the early Superman and Batman stories in which the heroes serve justice, not law. Additionally Robin Hood is an early dual-identity character who maintains a vigilante stance, taking the law into his own hands in opposition to the official position of his government; thus he is a forerunner of the dual-identity avenger-vigilante.

Robin Hood served as a primary source for both Superman and Batman via Douglas Fairbanks' portrayal of the character. Fairbanks' costume pictures—particularly *Robin Hood*, *The Mark of Zorro*, and *The Black Pirate*—inspired Superman's costume (Andrae, "Of Superman" 1983, 14). Fairbanks served as a general model for Batman and as a specific inspiration for both the Boy Wonder Robin's name and costume (Kane, *Batman and Me* 1989, 46).

Conclusion

These mythological and legendary heroes provide the deep background, roots, and prototypes for the superhero. Sometimes they

offer immediate inspiration to the creators, as with Samson, Robin Hood, and Hermes; other times they merely serve as a version of the collective "cultural unconsciousness"—the background we all carry with us because of the way characters, motifs, and plot dynamics provide the models of character and narrative that authors draw on intentionally and unintentionally. But the superhero has more direct progenitors than these mythic, epic, and legendary heroes. What were those progenitors? What led directly to the superhero genre?



SUPERHERO

THE SECRET ORIGIN OF A GENRE

by PETER COOGAN

INTRODUCTION BY DENNY O'NEIL