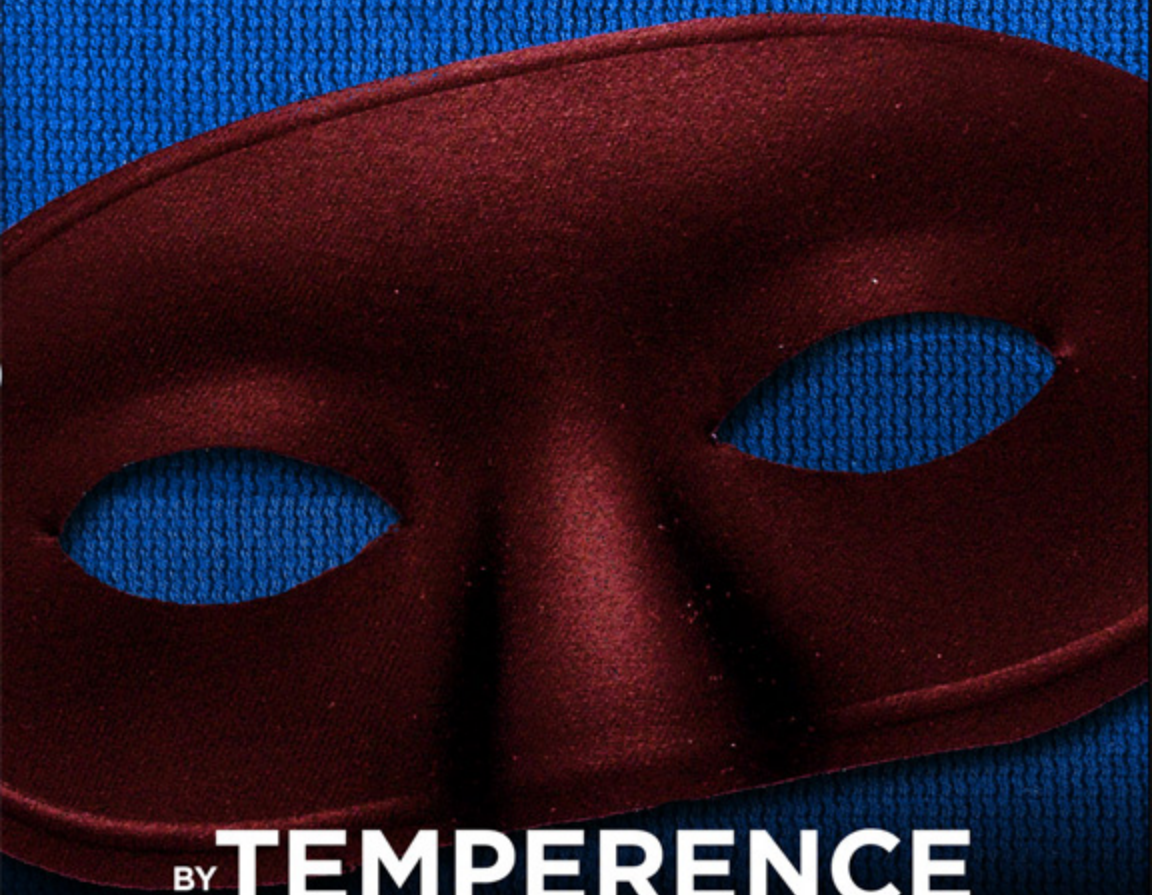


THE
SUPERHERO
COMPLEX



BY **TEMPERANCE**
JONES

THE SUPERHERO COMPLEX

In recent years, it has become inescapably apparent that the rise of the superhero has had profound and ongoing effects on society at large. But many fundamental questions about the superhero phenomenon have still yet to be explained. How much of this phenomenon is rooted in classical mythology, and how does it contribute to mythology in the modern age? Why have superheroes opted to work outside the law as vigilantes? And how much do we have to fear from the so-called supervillains who choose to use their gifts for ill instead of good? What is the significance of the masks superhumans wear and the monikers they hide behind? Where did these superpowers come from? Can these superhuman abilities be scientifically understood and recreated? And what are the implications of all of these questions for our world and generations to come?

In "The Superhero Complex," Dr. Temperance Jones addresses these questions and more, utilizing a wide array of social and scientific disciplines, including psychology, mythology, cultural anthropology, political theory, semiotic identity theory and studies in subjects as far-ranging as transhumanism, vigilantism and terrorism.

Auxford University Press
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 2012 by Auxford State Press, Inc.
First published in 2012 by Auxford University Press, Inc.,
190 ½ Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
First issued as an Auxford University University Press hardback, 2012
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jones, Temperance
The Superhero Complex / Temperance Jones
p. cm.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

Printed in the United States of America

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*This book is dedicated to Fade.
The hero L.A. needed.
1977 - 2012*

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Chapter 2

Classical Myths

For the better part of the 20th century, there were no documented cases of superhuman abilities in any authoritative historical record. It should come as little surprise, then, that most mythologists of that era attributed the superhuman powers that were oft related in mythological texts to naught but primitive arrogance.

At an early stage of society men, ignorant of the secret processes of nature and of the narrow limits within which it is in our power to control and direct them, have commonly arrogated to themselves functions which in the present state of knowledge we should deem superhuman or divine (Frazer, 1922/1996, p. 194-195).

To early mythologists, it seems, a myth's value could only be determined by the extent to which it was a truthful retelling of actual historical events. But philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein took issue with this view, refuting the practice in general and Frazer's methods in specific: "As Wittgenstein pointed out... a myth is not a scientific hypothesis about the constitution of the world: it does not aim to put forward a theory and cannot, therefore, be approached from the standpoint of its claim to truth" (as cited in Bottici, 2007, p.9).

To hear Scott Leonard tell it (“History of mythology part I,” n.d.), mythologists of the school of historical allegory like Euhmeros believe that “the ancients exaggerated the historical facts of actual persons and events and, because they did not have access to better forms of knowledge, accepted these embellished stories as truth.”

Stoics took the concept of mythological allegory one step further, completely discounting the literal, surface meaning of the narrative in favor of a purely allegorical reading of the ancient texts. But it is this author’s opinion that theories of this bent effectively divorce myths from the cultural context within which they were originally conceived. Scott Leonard (“History of mythology part II,” n.d.) suggests that we can only “fully appreciate what myths meant to those who created them by examining, insofar as it is possible, the original context in which they circulated.”

Leonard (“What is myth?”, n.d.) goes on to say that the Ancient Greeks, among others, “do not seem to have distinguished – as modern readers do – between stories about gods and heroes and other kinds of narratives.” This is just one piece of a preponderance of evidence which suggests that, at the time, ancient cultures believed their myths to be unambiguously true. That being the case, these beliefs would have had profound effects on the course of their societies’ histories. In much the same way that religious purists take their sacred texts as gospel, it is clear that ancient peoples believed their myths were more than what postmodern mythologist Bruce Lincoln went on

to describe in *Theorizing Myth* as “ideology in narrative form” (as cited in “History of mythology part II,” n.d.)

But recent events have forced mythologists to re-evaluate the origins of classical mythic texts yet again. Even though the first verifiable superhuman sighting occurred naught but thirty years ago, there is a distinct possibility that superhumans have walked the earth for longer than any of us have imagined. In a world where superhuman powers are no longer merely the stuff of fiction, one has to wonder if primitive man’s belief in superstition and myth is, in fact, rooted in the most ancient ancestors of the modern superman. Just because men stopped believing in them doesn’t necessarily mean that their gods never existed.

It is the belief of this author that many of the heroes of classical mythology were at one time living, breathing, historical figures. And this notion is certainly not new: “Euhemeros argued that all divine and semi-divine beings described in myth were, at one time, remarkable but nevertheless ordinary people whose deeds became so romanticized and sentimentalized over time that they were eventually honored as gods” (Leonard, History of mythology part I,” n.d.).

Mircea Eliade (1949/2005) went so far as to assert that “the historical character of the person celebrated in epic poetry is not in question” (p. 42). If this is indeed the case, and if some of these historical figures were, in fact, in possession of the superhuman abilities attributed to them in ancient mythic texts, it would seem imprudent to

relegate ancient myths to the category of purely fictional parables, as the Stoics are wont to do. Rather, it seems entirely more likely that mythic texts would have resulted from what Eliade referred to as the “transfiguration of history into myth” (p. 37).

But how precisely are we to define myth? Every school of mythological thought has a different definition for the term, and those we discussed above are only the tip of the iceberg. For the purposes of this work, we’ll be defining myth as “a transfiguration of history into an archetypal, exemplary narrative.” But let’s delve more deeply into exactly what that means.

Many ethnologists, notably Joseph Campbell, have observed recurring “mythic motifs” in many disparate mythological/theological traditions. In his work “*Ethnische Elementargedanken in Der Lehre Vom Menschen*,” Ethnologist Adolf Bastian called these recurring themes *Elementargedanken*, what psychologist Carl Jung would later identify as “archetypes of the collective unconscious” (as cited in Campbell, 1986/1995, p. 11). And, according to Bastian, where these mythic traditions diverge is the *Volkergedanken*, the “ethnic” or “folk ideas” that make these universal themes relevant to specific cultures (including the biographical details of the historical personage who is being inscribed onto the universal mythological archetype). Joseph Campbell (1986/1995) asserts that this duality of myth helps to reconcile the differences between true historical events and their mythic retelling:

Such a recognition of two aspects, a universal and a local, in the constitution of religions everywhere clarifies at one stroke those controversies touching eternal and temporal values, truth and falsehood, which forever engage theologians; besides setting apart, as of two distinct yet related sciences, studies on the one hand of the differing 'ethnic' or 'folk ideas,' which are the concern properly of historians and ethnologists, and on the other hand, of the Elementargedanken, which pertain to psychology (p. 11).

But why, for all of recorded history, has it become such common practice for human beings to inextricably intermingle the heroes in their midst with exemplary (often divine) archetypes? To answer this question, Chiara Bottici (2007) turns to philosopher Hans Blumenberg's theory of *Arbeit am Mythos*, or "work on myth." "A myth, Blumenberg concluded, is not a product that is given once and for all, but is instead a process of the continual reworking of a basic narrative core or mythologem" (p. 7).

The mythicization of history, so far as Blumenberg is concerned, is a byproduct of humankind's ineffable search for *Bedeutsamkeit* (significance). "And it is for this reason that, in each context, the same narrative pattern is re-appropriated by different needs and exigencies" (Bottici, 2007, p. 7).

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Chapter 3

The God King

For most of recorded history, the core of humankind's search for significance has been the belief in one or more higher powers. And in a time when magic and science were all but indistinguishable, how else was primitive man to explain the miracles of the natural world, or the existence of human beings with seemingly supernatural powers, but by attributing these processes to a supremely powerful god (or gods) with some grand design for their people and the world they lived in? We're speaking, of course, about the roots of organized religion, which has been humankind's longest running venue for significance seeking, and is, in fact, only distinguishable from mythology inasmuch as proponents of the former believe that their respective religious texts are chronicles of actual historical fact, as opposed to narrativized ideology.

From the point of view of any orthodoxy, myth might be defined simply as "other people's religion," to which an equivalent definition of religion would be "misunderstood mythology," the misunderstanding consisting in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as reference to hard fact (Campbell, 1986/1995, p. 55).

All of which is to suggest that, in ancient times, in the absence of an alternative explanation, superhuman powers

would almost certainly have been regarded as being of divine origin, and in many cases, the wielders of such powers would likely have been elevated to godhood themselves. Thus, the superhumans that make up the pantheons of Greek and Roman mythology would have been deemed gods by their people. And it is this author's belief that this is precisely what happened.

Thomas Carlyle (2008) attests that the “Hero as Divinity” is the oldest primary form of Heroism. And with great power came great responsibility:

Men who are credited with powers so lofty and far-reaching naturally hold the highest place in the land, and while the rift between the spiritual and the temporal spheres has not yet widened too far, they are supreme in civil as well as religious matters: in a word, they are kings as well as gods (Frazer, 1922/1996, p. 196).

Bottici (2007) cites Marc Bloch's “The Royal Touch” and Ernst Kantorwicz's “The King's Two Bodies” as two of history's most seminal works on medieval political theology: “These two works, in particular, by starting from the observation that rulers share some properties with gods, opened the path for a new line of study on the mythical and symbolic dimensions of power” (p. 2).

And for much of humanity's recorded history, divine ordination of political power was the order of the day.

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Chapter 4

Twilight of the Gods

But if superhumans have indeed been around for thousands of years, whether due to divine providence or natural genetic evolution, why were they still relegated to mythology and legend as recently as three decades ago? It would stand to reason that an evolutionary offshoot of homo sapiens boasting superhuman powers would jump to the top of the food chain according to Darwin's survival of the fittest.

But suppose the opposite were true. If individuals with superhuman powers were indeed, as Frazer suggests, thrust into positions of political power, it is logical to assume that their days were numbered: the life-expectancy of god-kings was decidedly low.

The idea that early kingdoms are despotisms, in which the people exist only for the sovereign, is wholly inapplicable to the monarchies we are considering. On the contrary, the sovereign in them exists only for his subjects; his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of his position by ordering the course of nature for his people's benefit. So soon as he fails to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is dismissed ignominiously, and may be thankful if he escapes with his life.

Worshipped as a god one day, he is killed as a criminal the next (Frazer, 1922/1996, p. 206).

And thus, over the years, superhumans have not merely hidden their identities behind masks, many have effectively opted to hide their existence from the world altogether. Not for fear of prosecution for dispensing extrajudicial justice, but for fear of the responsibility that would be conferred upon them by the general public, the burden of being held up to unrealistic expectations, and the consequences for failing to live up to those expectations.

The burdensome observances attached to the royal or priestly office produced their natural effect. Either men refused to accept the office, which hence tended to fall into abeyance; or accepting it, they sank under its weight into spiritless creatures, cloistered recluses, from whose nerveless fingers the reins of government slipped into the firmer grasp of men who were often content to wield the reality of sovereignty without its name. In some countries this rift in the supreme power deepened into a total and permanent separation of the spiritual and temporal powers, the old royal house retaining their purely religious functions, while the civil government passed into the hands of a younger and more vigorous race (Frazer, 1922/1996, p. 211).

With the advent of modern religions, superhumans ceased being revered and were promptly branded as heretics. Indeed, during the Salem Witch Trials, countless people were put to death on the mere suspicion of having

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Chapter 5

Is Vigilantism the Price of Freedom?

Some 30 years ago, representatives of the world's superhuman community finally began to emerge from their centuries-long hibernation. It is this author's opinion that this return from self-imposed exile occurred in direct response to a critical mass of global corruption (and the crime and poverty that resulted). It was at this point in time that so-called superheroes began to emerge.

To one degree or another, superheroes devote their lives to fighting crime and social injustice. But superheroes are more than just crime fighters, because, powers or not, any would-be public servant could just as easily become a police officer, a fireman, or pursue one of countless other vocations. In actual fact, the desire to become a superhero stems from a distrust of those very institutions: Superheroes are, at base, vigilantes.

George R. Lucas Jr. (2010) defines a vigilante as “one who acts to establish some form of law-like order, either in the outright absence of laws, or when the established structures and institutions of law enforcement appear to be corrupt, ineffectual or otherwise lacking in the will or the power to enforce the law.”

That said, it should come as no surprise that the superhero zeitgeist found its footing in the 1980's, when corruption

was prevalent both in America and abroad. Lucas (2010) goes on to say that during periods when the established institutions of the law are subjected to profound moral decay, vigilantes take it upon themselves “to provide, through powerful and often unilateral action – and solely on his or her own recognizance – the kind of security and enforcement of the ends of justice that the law itself is intended, but unable or unwilling, to provide.”

And the culture of corruption that spawned the superhero movement has persisted to this day. It was a scant two years ago that LAPD law enforcement officials all the way up the chain of command were indicted for taking bribes from the Medina Drug Cartel, up to and including L.A. City Councilman Matthew Stannis. And interestingly enough, it took the involvement of a superhero to bring this widespread police corruption into the public eye. If not for the efforts of the Orphan, the Medina Cartel’s stranglehold on the city of angels might have persisted for many years to come.

But while the Medina Cartel scandal goes a long way towards justifying the existence of the superhero movement, the movement’s many and vocal opponents do make some salient points. Superhuman skirmishes result in dozens of innocent deaths each year, not to mention hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage, and with the vast majority of superheroes still hiding behind a mask of anonymity, there is no way to hold these men and women individually accountable for their actions.

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Chapter 6

Men of a Thousand Faces

The culture of corruption in the '80s may have inspired the superhero zeitgeist, but early representatives of the movement were keenly aware that history is not always kind to those who are different. To avoid the kind of persecution that we suspect befell the superhuman god-kings of days gone by, this new breed of superhumans adopted masked aliases. And for members of an emerging sub-culture in which discretion was the better part of valor, a mask of anonymity proved indispensable.

But while early superheroes may have donned masks purely to promote anonymity, disguise is only one facet of a face mask. As Donald Pollock (1995) points out, in many cultures, masks serve not only as instruments of the temporary extinction of identity, but often as signals of identity transformation. Pollock suggests that identity, in any given culture, is defined by a series of culturally conventionalized signs. In Western culture, for example, the face, specifically the eyes, are described as windows to the soul.

So in cultures where the conventionalized signs of identity are the eyes or the face, masks can achieve the temporary extinction of identity by obscuring said signs. And taking it one step further, Pollock (1995) says that a mask can promote a semiotic process of transformational identity to the extent that said mask indexically modifies one or more

of these culturally-relevant features. That said, more often than not, superheroes tend to err on the side of the small, eye-covering domino mask, popularized in *Comedia dell'arte*, which in and of itself has a very limited capacity for indexical identity transformation. Therefore, Pollock says, despite the face mask's inherent capacity for signaling identity transformation, "in Western cultures it is typically a costume that displays transformed identity, not the mask."

Early superheroes quickly found that their costumes allowed them to not only divest themselves of their own identities, but also to re-create themselves anew. According to Rudlin (1994), in medieval Italy, a masked man "was considered to have divested himself of his own identity by assuming another persona, for whose actions he was therefore not responsible." These newly-forged personas were blank slates upon which superheroes, or the public at large, could inscribe any identity they wanted. It was at this juncture that superheroes ceased being anonymous dispensers of vigilante justice and became mythic archetypes, personifications of cultural ideals.

Much like early superhero masks, the costumes donned by the first superheroes served little purpose beyond their practical applications. It would, this author suspects, be presumptuous to assume that early superheroes considered the psychological ramifications of their costumes in any conscious way.

Interestingly enough, in recent years, many superheroes have emerged who make no attempt to conceal their

identities from the public. Moreover, more than a few previously masked crime-fighters have gone on to publicly unmask.

So what on earth would possess a superhero to unmask in the face of such adversity? To begin with, the desire for fame and notoriety can sometimes eclipse the promise of safety through anonymity; costumed superheroism is by definition a thankless endeavor. And the city with more unmasked heroes per capita than any other? You guessed it: the city of angels. Much has been written about the local L.A. superhero called Fade, who subsidizes his superhero lifestyle with a half dozen corporate sponsorships. Has Fade cashed in on L.A.'s celebrity culture, or is "selling out" the only way that heroes who are not independently wealthy themselves can keep their heads above water?

But not all unmasked heroes are fame seekers. There is also some degree of magnanimity associated with unmasking; it helps to dispel the public's inherent skepticism of the masked vigilante's motivations. The ideals that a costumed hero fights for tend to be more readily embraced by the world at large when said hero has the courage of their own convictions. Another Los Angeles-based hero, Laurel Warren, better known as the Orphan, seems to fall into this category. In addition to fighting crime full time, the Orphan has used her newfound notoriety to raise awareness for a number of charitable organizations, particularly an orphanage called Lost Lambs, where the burgeoning hero purportedly spent her formative years.

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Chapter 7

The Superhero Complex (or Super-Personality)

Scott Leonard (“History of mythology part I,” n.d.) attests that “Myths and myth-making are not artifacts from the distant past but real and present activities even in our day when scientific rationalism is the dominant mode of thought.” And there is little doubt that mythopoeia is at play in the history of the modern superhero. It is, in fact, the mythopoetic process which distinguishes superheroes from garden-variety costumed vigilantes.

The mainstream media tends to use the terms “superhuman” and “superhero” interchangeably, but this is a popular fallacy. While the earliest superheroes were all possessed of extraordinary abilities, powers are no longer required to join the ranks of the modern superhero.

No, the defining characteristic of a superhero is what we will henceforth refer to as a superpersona. To cultivate a superpersona, the hero in question must undergo a mythicization according to Mircea Eliade’s (1949/2005) theory of the archetype, by which historical personages are transformed into exemplary heroes and historical events are placed in a “mythical category” (p. 142). Eliade noted that these heroes’ purported superhuman powers, “the supernatural elements summoned to reinforce their legends,” were only one aspect of their mythic

transfiguration. Additionally, he said, “this mythicization of the historical prototypes who gave the popular epic songs their heroes takes place in accordance with an exemplary standard” (p. 42). This “exemplary standard” is a key aspect of an emerging superpersona, as, generally speaking, the details of a given superhero’s heroic feats are less important than the ideology that drives them to do what they do.

As modern superhumans gradually achieved a level of celebrity akin to the mythopoetic deification of ancient superhumans, it was only a matter of time before the former’s adoring public began mythologizing the heroes in their midst. And given that these freshly created personas were not bogged down by a lifetime of baggage like their secret identities, doing so was a relatively easy task. Superheroes were a blank slate upon which society could inscribe any ideological agenda they wanted. And the costumes these heroes wore became an indelible part of their evolving public personas.

Though, technically speaking, masks and costumes are not required, for the lion’s share of modern superheroes, these accoutrements have become a kind of short-hand to signal that the cultivation of a superpersona is taking place. And sometimes costumes are designed to provide indexical clues to the ideological agenda of the superhero in question.

So, to round out our definition, superheroes are vigilantes who have cultivated a superpersona (ie: have taken on the characteristics of an exemplary archetype). And we need only substitute “criminal” for “vigilante” to arrive at our

definition for the modern supervillain. Even supervillains who, on the surface, appear to be nothing more than common criminals typically have more going on than even they themselves realize. Indeed, donning a colorful costume and establishing a public identity runs counter to every criminal's natural instinct to remain anonymous.

By definition, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, superheroes and supervillains are, through their deeds, appearance and appellations, establishing a cult of super-personality around themselves designed to advance a particular ideological agenda (even if the agenda is something as simple as promoting lawlessness and anarchy). And it goes without saying that the actions and beliefs of members of the modern-day superhero /supervillain community have just as much impact on the values of modern society as mythic heroes and villains of antiquity had on their contemporary societies.

In much the same way that ancient peoples emulated their superhuman gods, modern superheroes are setting an exemplary standard whether they're aware of it or not. And many unpowered individuals have idealized these heroes to such a degree that they've donned costumes themselves and endeavored to join their ranks. Though this practice has had decidedly mixed results, certain unpowered villains like L.A.'s Fury of Solace have managed to consistently outfox their powered hero counterparts.

We have even seen the advent of fanatical groups that revere certain superheroes as pseudo-religious figures that

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Chapter 8

Political Myths

With the separation of church and state brought by the age of rationalism, the basis of political authority shifted away from divine ordination, leading increasing numbers of people to begin seeking Bedeutsamkeit through a newly-conceived political mythology.

Political thinkers have acknowledged the relationship between myth-making and politics since as far back as the 5th century B.C. It was then that the Prime Minister Chandragupta Maurya posited that any successful ruler must also be an adept myth-maker (as cited in Cuthbertson, 2007b). Indeed, Gilbert M. Cuthbertson (2007a) suggests that “myth has been the primary tool which all politicians and political theorists have used in creating governments and interpreting reality.”

It was this realization which primarily influenced the development of Cuthbertson’s (2007a) Myth-Power-Value equation, which suggests that “myth exists at the interface of power and values and converts one into another.” “Elevated to an esoteric or cultic level, myth becomes a civic religion, the worship of civic heroes or guardians, or the cult of the state itself” (Cuthbertson, 2007a).

Chiara Bottici (2006) defines political myth as: “The continual process of work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience.”

Scott Leonard (“History of mythology part I,” n.d.) points out that Plato and other early philosophers “rationalized traditional myths to serve their immediate social and political purposes.” Likewise, modern political myths can be manufactured with an eye towards promoting specific political ends.

When political myths are created around historical figures, says Raul Girarde, they “necessarily mirror the mentality, ideology and Zeitgeist of a certain era” (as cited in Damnjanovic, n.d.). It should come as no surprise, then, that the current costumed vigilante zeitgeist should factor prominently into contemporary political thought, and vice versa. Just like politicians, members of the super community appeal to the mythopoetic process whether they are consciously aware of it or not, to aid in the development of their super-personas.

The fact that no known superhumans have run for high office themselves is perhaps due to the persistence of hate groups like the Humanist Army: it would seem that same instinct for self-preservation that led ancient superhumans to renounce their godhood and relegate themselves to mythological obscurity is still in play today. But as more and more superheroes-as-public figures take the world stage, anti-superhuman sentiment has become vastly diminished.

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Chapter 9

Origin of a Species

Since time immemorial, historians have utilized legend to chronicle the mythic rise to power of great historical figures. In superhero circles, the superhuman rise to power has come to be called an “origin story.” While the origins of some superheroes and supervillains remain shrouded in mystery, generally speaking there are some things that all origin stories have in common. If the hero or villain in question is possessed of superpowers, the source of those powers and abilities is usually addressed. An origin story is also usually the source of the political and/or spiritual mythology that defines a given hero or villain’s super-persona.

Most origin stories adhere to the structure of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey. And just like all myths, the accepted origin stories of prominent superheroes and supervillains are updated over time as they are re-appropriated from one generation to the next.

The fact that, by and large, superheroes conceal their identities behind masks makes it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction when attempting a biographical sketch. Inconsistency and exaggeration abounds in their origin stories and tales of their continuing exploits, which are primarily perpetuated by word of mouth and through sensationalized media stories.

To this point, Eliade (1949/2005) cites the story of Dieudonne de Gozon, third Grand Master of the Knights of St. John at Rhodes, and his legendary victory over the dragon of Malpasso, a mythic feat which Eliade attests was not attributed to de Gozon until well after his death, and is not confirmed in any of the historical documents of the time.

By the simple fact that he was regarded as a hero, de Gozon was identified with a category, an archetype, which, entirely disregarding his real exploits, equipped him with a mythical biography from which it was impossible to omit combat with a reptilian monster (Eliade, 1949/2005, p. 39).

It was thus, then, that the mythic origin stories of the world's earliest superheroes were inscribed from without, by society at large. But as superhumans increasingly became public figures, autobiographical origin stories began to emerge. Which is not to say that these mythological narratives are necessarily any more historically factual than origin stories that were imposed from without. We all narratize our lives to one degree or another, and especially cunning heroes and villains are learning that tailor-made origin stories are just as effective in the superhero trade as carefully cultivated political mythologies are in modern politics.

This is especially true of the unpowered individuals who manage to attain the status of superhero or supervillain through the cultivation of a super-persona.

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Chapter 10

Super Terrorism

Despite the fact that, strictly speaking, most superheroes act outside the boundaries of the law, society has by and large accepted -- and elected to respect the autonomy of -- this emerging subculture of costumed vigilantes. But in these complicated times, there is a decidedly fine line between vigilantism and terrorism. The FBI defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social goals” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). The supervillain Fury of Solace is the most recent in a growing number of individuals who straddle our definitions of superhero and supervillain by being both vigilantes and criminals, attempting to police the world on their own recognizance and utilizing illegal means like murder and acts of terrorism to do so.

Fury of Solace’s search for *Bedeutsamkeit* -- indeed, that of most terrorists -- is rooted in a peculiar ideology known as resentment, a concept explored in detail by the likes of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Max Weber (1993) defines resentment as “a concomitant of that particular religious ethic of the disprivileged which, in the sense expounded by Nietzsche and in direct inversion of the ancient belief, teaches that the unequal distribution of mundane goods is caused by the sinfulness and the

illegality of the privileged, and that sooner or later God's wrath will overtake them."

In order to explain the poor conditions in which they live, people tend to create a scapegoat, as a way of giving meaning to their suffering and a face to their enemy. Chiara Bottici (2006) described it best by invoking the work of Blumenberg once more:

As Blumenberg argues, not only do human beings need meaning in order to master the unknown, but also they need significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) in order to fight the indifference of the world. The way in which myth does so is by inserting the world in a narrative of events.

The mobilizational power of this kind of resentment is striking: "In this way, people that do not have any access to formal political power, can rely on the symbolic power of specific narratives to address their contemporary political conditions" (Bottici, 2006).

According to Ronald Pies (2001), a burgeoning terrorist "projects his own potential for evil onto [a] perceived persecutor, dividing the world into stark, Manichaen camps: the 'pure' and faithful believer, and the evil infidel who must be destroyed." In *Fury of Solace's* case, the evil infidel is personified in Max Mason, President and CEO of Mason International. *Fury of Solace* (2011a) likens corrupt business moguls like Mason to "poxes on the world of man," "festered tumors," he says, which ordinary citizens have a duty to "cut out" at the source.

But the assignment of blame that is inherent to resentment need not be arbitrary. Indeed, movements like the current superhero zeitgeist are not formed in a vacuum. Vigilante justice, terrorist activities and upheavals of political mythology reach an apex during times of economic, social and/or political crisis, and there is little doubt that our society is currently suffering the effects of all three.

The charges that Solace has levied against Max Mason have yet to be proven, but whether Mason is the root of the problem or just another cog in the machine, Mason is representative of the corrupt corporate culture that precipitated the development of the superhero movement. So-called heroes and villains alike have taken up arms against society's ills because they believe the current representatives of truth and justice simply aren't up to the task. And, God help us, they may be right.

Fury of Solace

While *Fury of Solace* does qualify as a terrorist under the FBI's broad definition of the word, Solace's stated aim is not to propagate terror; at least not amongst the general populace. Solace does share the terrorist's fanatical narcissism, but he also shares many characteristics with the mission-oriented serial killer. "Mission-oriented killers are fanatics engaged in a campaign to rid the world of evil," or some subset thereof identified by the killer (Barkan & Bryjak, 2011). Typically, mission-oriented serial killers target groups that are low on the social strata,

like prostitutes or minority groups, but Fury of Solace has set his sights higher, targeting (purportedly corrupt) captains of industry like Max Mason, President and CEO of pharmaceutical giant Mason International.

While typically serial-killers' own sense of self-preservation lead them to commit their crimes in comfortable anonymity, Solace feels compelled to take credit for his killings, in order to reap what he sees as ideological rewards, and to promote his own social agenda.

Fanatical, mission-oriented serial killers differ from most other types of serial killers in one important respect: generally speaking, it is not the violent act from which they derive pleasure, but the promise of a furtherance of their goals. "The dyed in the wool fanatic is largely immune to states of genuine ecstasy," Pies (2004) explains. "The fanatic is too self-absorbed, too preoccupied with control to permit anything quite so risky as ecstasy."

Fury of Solace has absolutely demonstrated an escalation in his m.o., not unlike the progression of most serial killers. Fury of Solace's earliest victims disappeared more than three months before Solace's first public address, and police were only able to connect Solace to those crimes because he openly claimed responsibility for them after the fact. Over time, Solace became brazen enough to broadcast, in advance, his intent to kill specific individuals. Fury of Solace (2011b) even went so far as to live-stream his most recent assassination attempt of Max Mason.

There is little doubt that Fury of Solace's campaign of terror against Mason International is driven by a deep-set resentment. Max Scheler described resentment as "a self-poisoning of the mind," and stressed that depths of revenge that said individuals seek need be distinguished from "the impulse for reprisals or self-defense" (as cited in Pies, 2001).

Revenge, as Scheler pointed out, is built upon the eroded foundation of impotence – the sense that, as an individual, one can make no real difference in the world, notwithstanding one's outward bravado or charisma. Board after board of envy, rage and spite are nailed together, year after year, until the ramshackle mental structure of the terrorist is complete (Pies, 2001).

What led Fury of Solace to hit rock bottom and to subsequently designate Max Mason as the architect of all the world's ills, we are left only to speculate. We do know that the man behind the red domino mask served a number of years in the U.S. military, and if Solace stayed that course long enough to become firmly indoctrinated into the military lifestyle, his discharge from that fraternity could have had profound psychological effects on the burgeoning supervillain, especially when you consider the deindividuation that service in the armed forces promotes. And interestingly enough, democratic militaries such as the U.S. Army routinely implement some of the same social psychological conditioning frequently utilized by violent cults: Namely, Depluralization, Self-deindividuation, Other-deindividuation, and

Dehumanization (Stahelski, 2004). Though U.S. Army personnel are trained to only dehumanize armed combatants, it is not unprecedented for one-time soldiers to subsequently extend the practice to include innocent noncombatants. Judging by the charisma evinced in his public addresses, Solace was likely an officer or officer in training before he parted ways with the armed forces.

It should be pointed out that, as a rule, terrorists are not generally characterized as psychotic. “While terrorist violence is immoral, it is not ‘senseless’ because it has an ultimate purpose: Evil means are justified by the ends they seek” (Hemmens & Walsh, 2008). Indeed, Fury of Solace’s mantra, “doing evil so you don’t have to,” evinces a level of self-awareness that is not displayed in the rest of his rhetoric.

In his treatise “On the Genealogy of Morals,” Nietzsche (1994/2007) posited that the existence of Schopenhauer’s enemies, be they real or imagined, was the only thing keeping the latter’s profound nihilism at bay. “His anger was his solace,” Nietzsche said of his fellow philosopher (p. 76). Surely this, consciously or otherwise, is the defining trait of Fury of Solace. He defines his existence not based on the pursuit of any specific ideal, but rather on the opposition to a prevailing one. He promotes, in himself and in his followers, resentment in its most basic form, fermenting a revolution through the creation of a common enemy in corrupt corporate America, while at the same time taking advantage of the prevailing costumed-vigilante zeitgeist to make himself the central figure of a socio-political myth which attempts to legitimize his aims.

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Chapter 11

Superhero Worship

Superheroes are, by definition, mythic figures, and according to Eliade (1949/2005), “the formulation, in modern terms, of an archaic myth betrays at least the desire to find a meaning and a transhistorical justification for historical events” (p. 147). This mythicization, the transfiguration of the superhero’s historical personage into a superhuman archetype, can grant said hero an “ontological status,” and imbue their actions with metahistorical, eschatological meaning (Eliade, 1949/2005, p. 142).

When superhumans are elevated by their peers to the level of supreme beings, it stands to reason that the actions of these so-called gods come to carry the weight of a great divine purpose. In an effort to become “as like as possible to God,” (Eliade, 1949/2005, p. 32) primitive men would emulate the actions of their divine heroes, and thus the characteristics of ancient superhumans would become their respective culture’s accepted virtues. And in much the same way, then, that ancient superhumans would have been worshipped as gods by their contemporaries, it seems it will only be a matter of time before modern superhumans are likewise thrust into positions of political and/or spiritual power.

Even though science grows ever closer to unlocking the genetic secrets of superhuman powers, there is no shortage

of superhumans who claim that their powers are of divine or supernatural origin. And the powers-that-be live in fear of the possibility that one day these spiritual superhumans may come to the conclusion that they can, nay must, for the good of mankind, exercise what could be perceived as a divine right to lead.

And in today's global village, mythology is more influential than ever before. "The very mediatic configuration of such a village enables political myth to reach levels of pervasiveness to which it could never have aspired in the past. Indeed, our life takes place in jungles of potential icons of a political myth" (Bottici, 2006).

In ancient times, tales of the old god-kings' greatness could reach only as far as word of mouth would allow, but today, breaking news can travel around the world via the internet in seconds, so we're beginning to see public figures – superheroes chief among them – who are being renowned the world over. Certain alarmist groups, like the Humanist Army, espouse a paranoid fear that superheroes could parlay their house-hold name status into some kind of arch campaign for world domination, but this author does not share their pessimistic appraisal of the situation. People are not cattle: if anything, the internet has made the average person *more* informed, and modern man does not suffer dictators lightly, powered or otherwise.

No, it is this author's opinion that spreading stories of superheroes far and wide can only be a boon to our modern culture. The good that these heroes do can now inspire desperate people in the four corners of the globe and

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Chapter 12

The Will to Superpower

Transhumanists believe that mankind as we know it is far from the pinnacle of our evolution as a species. Indeed, transhumanism suggests that the be all and end all of the human experiment is a theoretical posthuman, an individual “whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards” (Extropy Institute, n.d.).

Are modern superhumans the realization of transhumanism’s elusive ideal? Though superhumans possess powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, the modern superhuman might be more accurately described as transhuman, an intermediary step between humanity as we know it and our posthuman future.

Superhumans are not born only of adaptive genetic mutation. The fact that otherwise ordinary men have found themselves elevated to the ranks of the supermen as a result of freak scientific accidents suggests that superhuman abilities do not (necessarily) derive from some supernatural source, but are rather the result of natural processes that modern science has, as of yet, been unable to explain. “Physics becomes the mythology of the probable with an entire array of science fiction concepts at its borders” (Cuthbertson, 2007c).

And though genetically engineering superhumans has been officially outlawed by the global scientific community, it is

surely only a matter of time before fringe science determines how to impart by design the superhuman abilities that it has heretofore conferred only inadvertently.

For most of humankind's recorded history, human existence has been defined by an ongoing attempt "to become as like as possible to God," to elevate oneself by emulating the exemplary actions of the heroes and divinities chronicled in mythic/religious texts (Eliade, 1949/2005, p. 32). The superhero zeitgeist has already inspired countless unpowered individuals to emulate the pillars of the modern superhuman community in an attempt to cultivate a superpersona to aid in the furtherance of their particular goals. Indeed, for the better part of human history, the practical application of myth was limited to emulation: people could champion the ideals of a mythic god, but could not hope to become one themselves. But the day is fast approaching that godhood will be achievable by all who wish it.

Unlike superhuman powers that have developed as a result of adaptive genetic mutation, powers received through the application of fringe science tend not to be transferable to the subjects' offspring. That said, the closer modern science comes to discovering the parts of the human genome that unlock these powers, the more prevalent participatory superhuman evolution is likely to become.

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Book jacket designed by Adam Levermore