ALIENS AND AMAZONS: MYTH, COMICS AND THE COLD WAR MENTALITY IN FIFTH-CENTURY ATHENS AND POSTWAR AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

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Comic books and classical culture seem to be increasingly linked in recent years, whether through crossovers into one another's media or through portrayals in the mass media itself. Such a connection begs the question of the actual cultural relevance between these two particular cultural products and whether or not two such products can be found to be relevant to one another when separated by time and space - indeed, if two separate cultures experienced similar cultural pressures, would these cultural products represent these pressures in similar ways? Given previous scholarly work linking the Cold War-era in the United States and the Peloponnesian War in fifth-century Greece politically, this thesis argued that a cultural "Cold War mentality" existed both in early postwar America and fifth-century Athens, and that this "Cold War mentality" is exhibited similarly in the comic books and mythology produced in those eras. This mentality is comprised of three stages: increased patriotism, a necessary identification of a cultural other, and attempts by a threatened male society to obtain psychological power through the "domestication" of women. The methods of this thesis included cultural research as well as research into myth and comic books of the respective eras. Chapter One argued that the so-called "labors" of the Athenian hero Theseus and the exploits of Superman and Batman can be interpreted as "catechisms of patriotism" that tell citizens how they should act in adversity. The second chapter argued that the Spartans and Amazons could have been iconographically linked as others by the Athenians, and shows that the Spartan/Amazon other, as well as the alien/Communist other of EC science-fiction comics were both imagined not as wholly physical threats, but largely as political and ideological ones. The final chapter showed that Athenian and
American societies viewed women not as obstacles or monsters as most have argued, but instead as repositories of a civilizing societal power that male society needed to acquire to be strong in the face of a difficult, othered enemy. This is shown through discussions of the vengeful actions of such mythological characters as Medea and Clytemnestra, as well as the fear of revenge exacted by the women of the EC horror comics of the 1950s. These findings pointed out the similar cultural expressions of the Cold War experience in both Athenian and American cultures, and suggested a link between the processes involved in producing cultural artifacts.
For my parents, whose love and encouragement made me what I am; for my brothers, who kept reeling me back into comic books; for all of my teachers and professors who, step by step, helped me see the beauty of the ancient world; and for all the myth-makers and their devotees, past and present, whose works inspired this one.
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We seem to forget, or merely take it for granted, that every action has a purpose behind it, and that the act is deliberately performed by an actor. Each action, purposeful as it is, ends up mattering – personally, collectively, or in the world-at-large. Additionally, the purpose of each act is tied to a sense of relevancy; in other words, each act is meant, on a conscious or subconscious level, to be meaningful and useful under a certain set of circumstances to the actor or a second or third party. These meanings and uses are sometimes apparent, sometimes hidden, but nevertheless constantly present, waiting to be discovered.¹

The foregoing brief – and, perhaps, unexpected – discussion is itself relevant, as we shall see, because the discipline of history is attached to the idea that action is significantly (if not inherently) tied to meaning. For the historian, discovering or constructing meaning – and therefore relevance – out of historical fact is an overarching goal; history must be meaningful in order to educate the audience themselves, ultimately, about the largely unstated purpose of the discipline. History without meaning is merely a story told in detail, so meaning is vital because it makes a historical topic educational and relevant.² Relevance, then, is the cornerstone of any act of historical construction. This statement is not innovative, of course: the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, in his History of the Peloponnesian War, underlined it when he summed up the use, meaning and relevance of his own work in a single statement:


It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.  

This is not to say that the relevance, meaning, and use of certain topics – historical or otherwise – are constant. What is relevant, and to whom it applies, is nebulous. What is important to a society at one moment can change almost without warning. And I am not, I think, going too far out on a limb when I say that a particular society’s thoughts and emotions can be shaped by that society’s environment, current affairs, etc. – just as a historian’s work often reflects personal biases.  

That said, two interests – or perhaps fascinations – found in American popular culture have emerged quite publicly in the past decade: an interest in comic books and the comic book industry, and an interest in ancient (or, more appropriately, classical) history and culture. Both have come to their fullest flower via film and television. A May 8, 2004, report on National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition Saturday noted that pop culture portrayals of the ancient world – especially the Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome – were alive and well in the mass media: depictions of Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Socrates, and Homer’s Iliad have been either slated or produced for the big screen, and two recent series on the small screen, on ABC and HBO, focused on the Roman empire. Furthermore, Bradford Wright, in a chapter added to his monumental Comic Book Nation in the wake of September 11, pointed out that comic book

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4 Munslow, 14.
heroes are themselves highly visible on the silver screen, as exemplified by such comic book films as *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*.\(^6\)

Both reports, however, only scratch the surface. The popular media’s recent interest in classical history and civilization, for one, can be traced to the last decade, with such television programs as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* sharing the airwaves with late-1990s network miniseries chronicling, for example, the life of Cleopatra, or adapting Homer’s *Odyssey*. Mel Gibson’s recent silver-screen Biblical chronicle, *The Passion of the Christ*, fits admirably into this trend of “ancientism.”

The popular interest in comic books has been expressed with equal verve. While it is common knowledge that cartoons featuring comic book superheroes have been Saturday morning mainstays for quite some time, comic book films continue to be churned out by Hollywood, with recent offerings representing such diverse comics creations as *Hellboy*, *Batman*, *The Fantastic Four*, *V for Vendetta*, *Constantine*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Daredevil*, *Electra*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Sin City*. The comic books themselves, as Wright notes, whether in graphic novel or single-issue format, have recently been very popular in the marketplace.\(^7\) On top of this, books related to, or discussing, comic books and their characters are appearing in large numbers: encyclopedias of characters from the DC and Marvel universes were recently published, as well as industry-encompassing reference works by Ron Goulart, and Steve Duin and Mike Richardson.\(^8\) For those interested in creating comic

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\(^7\) Ibid, 291, 293.

books for themselves, a veritable library of “How to…” books exists to teach the aspiring artist character design, perspective, anatomy, computer coloring, mood, and other aspects of the comics trade, often featuring advice and lessons from comic book artists and writers themselves.  

The nearly side-by-side rise of popular interest in comic books and classical culture – specifically classical myth – is made even more interesting when one observes the increasing intersection between the two. Eric Shanower’s Age of Bronze, a black-and-white comic book series adapting the Trojan War mythos (albeit with a more “realistic” slant) saw the collection of its first 19 issues in the graphic novel volumes A Thousand Ships and Sacrifice; classical mythological and cultural content abounds in the recent Wonder Woman compilation Down to Earth and has been heavily integrated into such titles as Top Ten and Mike Mignola’s Hellboy. Perhaps the king of classical – and, specifically, classical Greek – references in the comic world is acclaimed writer/artist Frank Miller, who peppers his works, including three volumes of his Sin City series, with sly, educated allusions to classical Greek and Roman civilization. Indeed, Miller wrote and illustrated a miniseries based on the now-obscure fifth-century Greek battle of Thermopylae, entitled 300. Looking at this evidence, one could

HarperCollins, 2004), and Steve Duin and Mike Richardson, Comics Between the Panels (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1998).
9 Space and relevance prohibit me from discussing the large volume of these works in greater detail. However, excellent examples of these include Wizard Entertainment, How to Draw: The Best of Wizard Basic Training, Vol. 1 (Congers, N.Y.: Wizard Entertainment, 2005), Christopher Hart, Drawing Cutting Edge Anatomy: The Ultimate Reference Guide for Comic Book Artists (New York: Watson-Guptil, 2004), and Christopher Hart, Drawing Cutting Edge Comics (New York: Watson-Guptil, 2001).
11 See Alan Moore, et al., Top Ten: Book II (La Jolla, CA: America’s Best Comics, 2002); for a good example of myth at work in the storytelling of the folklore- and myth-laden Hellboy, see Mike Mignola, Hellboy: Wake the Devil (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1997).
12 See Frank Miller, 300 (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1999); A Dame to Kill For: A Tale from Sin City, 2nd ed. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1995); The Big Fat Kill: A Tale From Sin City (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1996); and Hell and Back: A Sin City Love Story (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2000).
conclude that, while ancient history and comic books have increased in relevance to society, they have also become more relevant to each other.

I would like to use the intersections of Greek myth and American comic books mentioned above as the starting place for the study at hand. The comic book and the myth – specifically the classical myth – have already had a longstanding modern relationship. Commentator Richard Reynolds notes that a number of comic book heroes, most notably Superman and Captain Marvel, were themselves either based on gods and heroes of classical mythology, or call upon such characters to manifest their powers.\textsuperscript{14} Put another way, “comic book writers consciously steal wholesale chunks of classical antiquity and sell it to youngsters, who respond to it as freshly and warmly as the audience for which it was first created.”\textsuperscript{15} In addition, Lillian s. Robinson has argued that comic books and mythology tend to share a basic metaphorical, symbolic, and thematic content.\textsuperscript{16} Such modern relevance may also have valuable consequences for a cross-time study.

That is not the only reason for undertaking a study of myth and comics. Comic books, as many commentators have noted, are characterized as children of a lesser god in the modern mass media, continually pushed aside. The scholars Wright, Reynolds, and William W. Savage make explicit mention of this in their works and, to some extent, attempt to rectify the situation – as does Peter Allon Schmidt in his 2002 thesis \textit{History of Atomic Power and the Rise of the Comic Book Superhero}\textsuperscript{17} - but perhaps the most vocal proponent of the acceptance of comic books as a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{17} Reynolds, 7; William W. Savage Jr., \textit{Commies, Cowboys and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), ix-x; See the abstract and introduction of Schmidt’s thesis.
\end{thebibliography}
legitimate art form has been the medium’s persistent modern apologist, Scott McCloud. Himself a comic book creator, McCloud has written two groundbreaking works over the past 13 years, seeking to remove the bastard status from the comics medium: His *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, published in 1993, essentially a user’s guide to the comic book, looks at the interior mechanisms of comics and lays bare the role that human psychology plays in their enjoyment, all with the added bonus of not only helping the reader understand what comics are and how they work, but also why they should be respected.\(^1^8\) His second work, less successful but just as important, is *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, published in 2000. While this volume suffers from an overly-didactic and rather self-serving tone, it nonetheless provides an important look at the political, cultural, and financial trials, tribulations, and traumas experienced by the industry in the late-1990s and points the way for a rejuvenated medium based not on newsstands but on the internet.\(^1^9\)

While comic books are continually seeking acceptance from the mainstream media (and are, by some measures, receiving it), the status of the classics in the public eye has begun to slip – a condition first diagnosed in the early decades of the last century. Indeed, in 1939, Mary Trowbridge Honey, a classicist herself, described a classical education diluted by, and under fire from, changing societal mores arising from the Great Depression and the coming of World War II.\(^2^0\) The problem continued: in 1975, classics instructor Harris K. Leonard opined that

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\(^{1^8}\) This is but a taste of the rich, eye-opening information that this book provides. See McCloud, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).


\(^{2^0}\) See Mary Trowbridge Honey, “The Classics in America,” *Greece & Rome* 9, no. 25 (October, 1939): 36-42.
“constantly, teachers of the classics are confronted with apathy and an increasing disregard for classical literature.”

For me, this is discouraging. However, Leonard did note that there was a way that the classics could be translated into the modern day: inserting comic books into the classical curriculum in a sly way, by having students read a piece of classical literature and then make a comic book out of it. However, while Leonard noted that comic books did contain elements of classical cultures, he considered them psychologically damaging, causing a skewed view of the world. Indeed, he writes that “the reason [students] were in college was not to learn comic book writing, but to counter the comic book mentality of our age with a more educated vision. The classics provide that vision. The classics are classics because they represent the finest and most humane statement on the universal human condition.” Essentially, comic books were to be used as a carrot, and then discarded. But could it be that comic books and the classics – specifically classical Greek mythology – can be compared and used side-by-side in a manner that is beneficial to the classics without trivializing comics?

If comic books and classical Greek myth are to be compared to this end, however, then it is necessary to put them in a situation where they can be easily juxtaposed in terms of culture and time-frame, where those variables will be less of a problem. For instance, which Greek myths from which era in Greek history should be looked at? Which comic books of which modern era should be examined? Indeed, what two time periods across years and cultures could offer enough similarity to support a worthwhile side-by-side examination? I argue that the early Cold War periods in America, from 1945 until roughly 1960, and the post-Persian War/Peloponnesian War

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21 See Leonard, 405.
22 Ibid, 405-407.
23 Ibid, 406.
era in the polis of Athens of the fifth century B.C.E., offer such similarities. Their usefulness for this project can perhaps best be seen through brief discussions of their respective historical periods.

The early days of the Cold War era (defined here as stretching from 1945 through the late 1950s) and the Peloponnesian War era of the fifth century B. C. E. seem to exhibit similar thematic elements. First, the eras’ dominant powers – the United States and Russia, Athens and Sparta – before their ideological and military stalemates, had been close allies in the conflicts leading up to (and perhaps causing) their later rivalries, and the immediate postwar conditions created a noticeable paradigm shift in the distribution of power. In looking at the Second World War, intimate involvement – of a somewhat amicable degree – between the United States and the Soviet Union began in 1941 following Hitler’s defiance of his 1939 non-aggression pact with Stalin. America and Russia, despite staunch ideological disparity, would remain allies throughout the war. However, as the war drew to a close, splits appeared between the two over their proper places in the postwar world. At the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in early and mid-1945, while progress was made towards the creation of the United Nations, Soviet ambitions in Eastern Europe, Germany, and the northern regions of Korea (which was divided at Potsdam along the 38th parallel) became clear and were strongly enforced.24

The era following the Persian War, beginning in 480 BCE and continuing through the end of the fifth century in Greece, adhered to a similar pattern. In 480 BC, the Persian king Xerxes led an invasion force into Greece which was ultimately beaten back by a confederacy of Greek poleis, led by the Peloponnesian city-state of Sparta, one year later. However, the Pan-Hellenic spirit that led the Greeks to best their eastern foes withered after their victory, and the

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two largest players on the Greek side, Sparta and the mainland Greek poleis of Athens, found themselves in the midst of a growing dualistic rivalry.25

In 478, two years after the defeat of Persia, the Greeks’ overall stomach for Spartan leadership and views of Spartan ability to gain the now all-important victory on the seas, soured and the leadership of the Greek alliance was removed from Spartan hands and placed in the stewardship of Athens. Ably taking the reins, the Athenians converted the alliance into a confederated league, headquartered on the Aegean island of Delos, fearing that the Persian menace might reemerge. As such, the league was designed to put Persia on the defensive and, in the Athenian mind, under the control of Greece. To this end, Athens rebuilt its defensive walls (thus angering the Spartans) and began to lead actions against the Persian-held quarters of the Aegean, as well as those poleis who tried to secede from the League – a move that made other poleis eager to leave the League on their own terms by 465.26

We see in these examples that the early days of the two periods under discussion were fraught with concerns for the ordering of the postwar world after a close alliance between two emerging authorities. While an ostensible peace was reached during the war years, following the conflict in both eras the dominant powers were at odds over how the new world would be laid out. In the post-World War II environment, it is the Soviet Union that takes the political offensive, gathering up a great deal of territory following the allied victory to make the greatest geo-political gains of any power in the postwar world. In the days following the Persian Wars, we find a similar atmosphere. While many Greek states had banded together to battle the “Persian Menace,” all eyes turned to the two main powers, Athens and Sparta, following the


26 Hornblower, 21, 22; Powell, 1, 2, 5-10, 16-17, 20-21.
conflict. Athens, at the allies’ behest, replaced the former Spartan hegemony of the Greek forces, and went about consolidating the Greek allies into a pseudo-political, ostensibly autonomous entity – despite the fact that it used force to keep seceding member-states in their places. Thus, in both eras, we find a postwar of international (or, in the case of Greece, internecine) conflict regarding the reordering of the world, resulting in sweeping sea-changes.

These opening shifts of power and consolidations of land, in both eras, were followed by growing anxieties and displays of force by the threatened powers. In the early Cold War, Americans began to fear that the Soviet Union was instigating a slow, smooth takeover of the postwar world. No doubt wishing to compensate for an increasingly compromised global position, the United States, following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, began to flaunt the bombings internationally, waving them about like a banner that announced American military superiority while casting verbal aspersions upon the growing Soviet hold on Eastern Europe. These tactics resulted in Soviet retorts and a general deterioration of relations between the two powers.\(^27\)

This is similar to the actions and reactions of Athens and Sparta in the fifth century: indeed, if relations between Sparta and Athens were only lukewarm previously, they would soon cool even further. In the late 460s, Athens sent military aid to Sparta, which was busy putting down a slave rebellion – a gesture of ostensible goodwill which the Spartans sharply rebuffed. Offended, Athens took action and allied itself with Argos, a traditional enemy of Sparta; Megara, a former member of Sparta’s own Peloponnesian League, subsequently defected and joined the Delian League.\(^28\) Heartened, the league’s ambitions increased, and the allies mounted an invasion of Persian-held Egypt which, despite a good beginning, ended in utter defeat. Wasting

\(^{27}\) Ball, 11; Lafeber, 20, 26-27, 28.

\(^{28}\) Powell, 35-36, 38.
no time, Sparta capitalized on Athens’ weakened position and began to attack the polis at home.\textsuperscript{29} We see in both eras that tempers ran high following initial disagreements over territories, and ignited a wave of rash actions on the part of the “threatened” power, which seemed to mushroom into further political entanglements: American rhetoric grew bolder in the face of Russia’s increased geopolitical influence, resulting in weakened diplomatic relations; and Sparta’s fearful rebuff of Athenian aid allowed both enemies and allies to flock to an emboldened Athens, whose further actions inspired Sparta to escalate the conflict.

The ruling powers in both eras were poised on the very precipice of destructive actions against one-another (indeed, in fifth-century Greece, Sparta had already instigated the first openly hostile salvos); these dams of anxiety would shortly burst into overt conflict. In the post-World War II atmosphere, by 1946 Soviet and American forces were oppositionally positioned throughout the globe, coiled to strike at the slightest provocation. Eastern Europe, Iran and Turkey all seemed to be succumbing to Communism, and in early March President Truman delivered his so-called “Truman Doctrine” address, outlining the growing struggle between the American and Soviet systems. This was followed in the next year with the Soviet blockade and subsequent Allied airlift, of Berlin, which cemented the partitioning of Germany into Communist east and Democratic west.\textsuperscript{30} As China fell to Communist partisans and Red agents were discovered in America and Britain, the crises seemed to deepen: in 1949, Russia exploded its first atomic bomb, and NATO was formed, followed the next year by the beginning of Joseph

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 38-39, 42.

McCarthy’s accusations of Communist infiltration in the U.S government and the start of the Korean conflict.  

Similarly, in reaction to increasing Spartan belligerence, Athens constructed what were termed the “Long Walls” to protect exterior economic activity. In 454, Athens moved the league’s treasury to Athens itself, and four years later also cemented another ceasefire with Persia via the Peace of Kallias, leaving Sparta its only enemy. Consolidating the Delian League into a de facto empire, Athens now found itself under literal fire from rebelling league members, as well as Sparta, which invaded the Athenian home-region of Attica. This conflict was shortly concluded in the 30 Years’ Peace of 446, while Athens continued its policy of attempting to set up democratic governments among its allies – a policy which incited even more rebellions from pro-oligarchic factions among the allied people.

Having begun as struggles over the control of postwar leadership and furthered by the gathering anxieties of the “threatened” party, we can clearly see that in both eras this anxiety increased and exploded into outright hostility: in the Cold War world, the U.S. and Soviet Union saw themselves in a righteous struggle against one another, and each action by the one resulted in escalating retaliation by the other. In the fifth century, concerned by growing military sallies on the part of an increasingly bellicose Sparta, Athens attempted to pull its allies together even tighter and introduce democratic institutions among its allies, a program which reaped a whirlwind of difficulties for the new empire.

In the final days of the early Cold War period and the Peloponnesian War era we observe that both periods conclude with one power apparently holding the upper hand over the other.

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32 Powell, 45, 49, 50, 60, 61, 63, 65, 71, 73, 74, 83.
While Stalin’s death in March 1953, and his replacement with Georgi Malenkov, allowed for a compromised peace to be made in Korea, troubles in the Far East were not over, as Communist China soon attempted a takeover of Taiwan. In May of 1954 the conflict between Communism and democracy hit far closer to home, as the United States tried to stem the tide of anti-Communist fighters in Guatemala. September of 1955 found the U.S. stepping into the French position in Vietnam following the latter’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu, while the Soviet Union attempted to woo the Middle East and Central Asia with promises of a better economy. The USSR’s right to such ambition seemed justified when, in 1957, in the space of two months, it launched the world’s first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in August, and then, on Oct. 4, released Sputnik into space. The Russians seemed, by the end of the 1950s, and after more than 15 years of chilled conflict, to hold a technological sword of Damocles over their western rival’s head.33

In Athens, a new crop of problems erupted following the failure of the 30 Years’ Peace in 432 and its actions seemed to become more desperate: beset by a storm of revolts, the imperial polis found itself at war with the polis of Corinth. Soon, despite victories over rebelling poleis and a force of Spartans, the Athenian attempt to increase the tribute from their allies resulted in further revolts, including one at Skione, which ended with the execution of every male in the polis at the hands of Athens. Between 415-413 Athens tried and spectacularly failed to capture the island of Sicily, and, following that massive defeat, found oligarchic factions throughout the empire raising Spartan-led rebellions across Athenian holdings. Taking the offensive, Sparta raised a navy and, after a further seven years of hard fighting, succeeded in finally defeating

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33 Ball, 78, 83; Lafeber, 128, 149, 154, 158, 161, 162, 163-164, 165, 176, 199, 200.
Athens. With no seagoing forces to safeguard its shipping, Athens was starved into submission and, in 404, surrendered to Sparta, who forcibly removed Athens’ imperial rights.\(^\text{34}\)

From the brief summaries above, the fact that the early days of the American Cold War era and fifth-century Greece share a number of similarities is clear. As the scholar Victor D. Hanson notes, other comparisons, both positive and negative, may also be drawn: Both periods, as we’ve seen, emerged as a result of monolithic ideological differences; both periods began after the conclusion of another, large-scale conflict against a foreign power(s); both periods experienced their own bouts of domestic political paranoia; the various make-ups of the Athenian and Peloponnesian alliances can easily be compared to NATO and the Warsaw Pact.\(^\text{35}\)

There is precedent for such comparisons: links drawn between the Peloponnesian War era and the Cold War (or, indeed, other historical epochs) are nothing new in the scholarly world. As international relations scholar Robert Gilpin wrote,

> At critical moments scholars and statesmen have seen their own times reflected in … the conflict between democratic Athens and undemocratic Sparta. The American Civil War, World War I, and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union have been cast in this light.\(^\text{36}\)

Indeed, McCann and Strauss, in their edited volume *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War*, consider the query “Was ancient Greece similar to the modern West or radically different?” to be “the perennial question for the classicist.”\(^\text{37}\)

That volume includes more than 15 essays on a number of aspects of the Korean and

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34 Powell, 75, 76, 167-168.


37 McCann and Strauss, xii.
Peloponnesian wars, both comparatively and singly. Such a proliferation of analyses is at once a blessing and, for those looking to contribute original scholarship to the field, a curse. If an existing comparison between fifth-century Greece (especially Athens) and the Cold War has already been so well-trodden, is there still space for new scholarship? Can anything more be said? Indeed, what avenues of similarity between the American Cold War and fifth century Athens have been ignored? One might very well stop here and argue that the following analysis replicates earlier work – and, indeed, if each of the myriad subjects to be dealt with in this project were taken singly, it would seem so.

Scholarship on the Peloponnesian War and the Cold War as single topics, both in toto and covering particular aspects, is voluminous. The already-cited works by such scholars as Powell, Ball, Lafeber, and others barely crack the ice. The literature on fifth-century myth and its cultural and political application is also legion, as are the discussions of its changes and appearance in the century following the Persian Wars, including William Blake Tyrrell’s excellent monograph *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* and other examinations of the emergence of Theseus as a hero at Athens, the changing conceptual status of Herakles, and the interpretation of group battle scenes on public works. The world of early postwar comic books has also not been lacking in attention: Wright’s *Comic Book Nation*, Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* and William W. Savage Jr.’s *Commiss, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* are but a few of the works examining the content

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and production of comics in this era. Based on this brief survey of available literature alone, it would seem there is little left to say on any of these topics – unless one considers them together and in relation to each other.

To begin with, those studies that contribute explicit comparisons of the Cold War and the conditions in fifth-century Greece (and they are surprisingly few) posit their analyses on very specific grounds: scholars such as Gilpin and others in the political science community seek to use (and evaluate) a comparison of the Peloponnesian War and the Cold War – or, more broadly, seek to use *Thucydides*’ account of the Peloponnesian war alongside the Cold War– as an interpretive model. Even McCann and Strauss’s *War and Democracy*, despite its interdisciplinary approach, including essays by classicists, historians, international relations scholars, Koreanists and others, seems to focus largely on the implications of *democracies* and how they are affected by war, not the cultures themselves– indeed, it is implicit in these essays collected in that work that democracy *overarches* culture, and not the other way around. Even essays which deal with the effects of war on culture do not do so comparatively (indeed, the book as a whole is less comparative than one might expect), focusing instead on the effects of war on the ancient Greek states.

Explicit comparisons of fifth-century Athenian and postwar American cultures are few and far between. Certainly a focus on politics and democracy is only natural (and, it seems,

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41 See also Michael T. Clark, “Realism Ancient and Modern: Thucydides and International Relations,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26, no. 3 (September, 1993): 491-494; and Peter Singer, “The Thucydides Tapes,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 3 (September, 1999): 596-601.

42 McCann and Strauss, xix.

almost expected) when examining both the Cold War and fifth-century Greece – the entire purpose of a comparative study is to see what can be learned for the future by the comparison, and in studying two periods and cultures where democracy was so dominant it makes sense to try and extract usable political lessons. However, few would argue that the mingling of Greek and American culture contributed much more than a form of government. While, for instance, Aristotle, in his *Politics*, did originate the three-tiered governmental model (executive, legislative and judicial branches), later elaborated on by Montesquieu who brought it in that form to the attention of the American founding fathers, that is by no means the extent of Greek influence on the United States.  

The founders of America, themselves classically educated, discovered more of use in Greek civilization than political models: both John Adams and John Quincy Adams were avid readers of such authors as Xenophon, Homer, Plato and Thucydides (the elder Adams, in fact, found the *History of the Peloponnesian War* to be an excellent treatise on everyday living). No less an individual than Thomas Jefferson peppered his personal and official correspondence with classical references aimed at making clear rhetorical points: in one such communiqué he declared, with nationalistic pride, that the American farmer (unlike his British counterpart) was capable of reading the works of Homer, thereby conferring a high mark of intelligence upon the average American swain. Further, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson drew on the legendary acts of Theseus when he declared sardonically, “introduce the bed of Procrustes then,

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and as there is danger that the large men may beat the small, make us all of a size, by lopping the
former and stretching the latter.”

These Greek cultural influences go further: while much Greek-inspired architecture and
sculpture is prevalent throughout Washington, D.C., one is struck by several less imposing
examples of interior decoration: first, in the Chamber of the House of Representatives, where a
number of “Lawgivers” of various cultures are presented in raised profile; among them the
Spartan luminary Lycurgus, and Solon, the famed Athenian politician. Elsewhere in the Capitol
building, one can find statues of such fifth-century Athenians as Pericles and Phidias. These
examples showcase now only political influences, but cultural ones as well, signs that Greece
touched more than American government. A comparison of the cultural, then, and not merely the
political, seems a promising avenue of analysis.

The cultural relevancies of early postwar comic books are not without their chroniclers,
either. The scholarly and pseudo-scholarly literature on comic books, which seems to have
increased markedly in the last decade or so, is something of a mixed bag, focusing on a number
of facets relating to the history, impact, and future of the comics medium itself. A number of
works, however, have focused on comic books in their historical context and as products of their
culture.

The literature on comic books of the years immediately following World War II, for
instance, is not entirely lacking. William W. Savage’s Cowboys, Commies and Jungle Queens:
Comic Books and America, 1945-1954, a fairly groundbreaking work when it was published in
1990, argues that comic books of the mid-to-late 1940s and early 1950s were a legitimate


48 U.S. Congress, House, Art in the United States Capitol. Prepared by the Architect of the Capitol under the
direction of the Joint Committee on the Library, 94th cong., 2d sess., House Document no. 94-660 (Washington:
medium through which the culture of the Cold War was funneled to the American public. Savage’s work, while important, is nonetheless far too narrow in terms of the comic books that he considers, and is bereft of any kind of cross-cultural analyses.

Other works centering on the comics of the early Cold War-era do not focus so much on the comics themselves but the indignant uproar they caused in America and abroad. Amy Kiste Nyberg’s informative *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* is emblematic of this trend. *Seal*, while not truly addressing comic books themselves, is important as an examination not only of the anti-comic book atmosphere of the 1950s (brought on by fears that the media increased juvenile delinquency in its consumers) and the subsequent creation of the Comic Code Authority, but also the machinations of the man behind it, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham.

Perhaps the most up-to-date of the scholarly works dealing with comic books is Bradford W. Wright’s already noted, hefty and century-spanning opus, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture*. Through excellent and insightful prose, Wright takes the reader from the birth of comics in the 1930s through the effect of 9-11 on the medium, and includes nearly 150 pages covering the medium’s trials, tribulations and travesties in the late 1940s and early 1950s. While providing a valuable survey of the changing world and how comics adapted to their audience’s new interests, Wright’s findings do not differ very much from the prevailing literature. Indeed, his focus on the Cold War, while lengthy, is largely a cursory one and, again, ignores cross-cultural connections.

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49 Savage Jr., ix-x.

50 It should be said, however, that an extensive literature, both primary and secondary, exists on Wertham’s anti-comics crusade and its results. Indeed, even the most cursory of popular histories on the comic book medium often include an entire chapter or entry on this subject. Other efforts include: Martin Baker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992); John A. Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign* (Madison, N. J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); and, perhaps the most infamous of all, Fredric Wertham’s own *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).
Comic books and their connections to myth have been discussed both in Master’s theses and in a cursory nature in other works. However, just as Richard Reynolds’ *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* focuses largely on the internal archetypes and themes of the comics, the authors just noted do not seem to use myth and comic books as a comparative tool so much as an interpretive one to understand the origins of the comics and their characters. Thus, while comic books of the Cold War have been analyzed to determine the effect of prevailing cultural winds on them, and even though comic books and myth in general have been looked at together, the two specific topics at hand – fifth-century Greek myth and Cold War comic books – have never been exclusively and explicitly compared.

The fact that those topics, in the literature discussed, were situated in a historical context – comic books in the 1950s and Greek myth of the fifth century – makes a subtle but important argument: both are cultural products, and both reflect their respective societies, an idea worthy of study. Indeed, it has been said that “studies of mythology may illuminate aspects of social structure; and an understanding of social structure and the values a social system embodies may enrich our understanding of its mythology.” A similar argument has been made for comic books. If these are both cultural products reflecting their respective societies, then the obvious question, for this study at least, is this: would such products, existing across a wide valley of space and culture, reflect their cultures similarly? Thus, there is still something to be said about all of the aforementioned topics when taken together.

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53 See Peter Allon Schmidt’s abstract and introduction, cited above.
Therefore, I will argue that the cultures of early postwar America and fifth-century Athens exerted similar Cold War pressures on their respective citizens. Furthermore, I will argue that the resulting fears and anxieties can be seen represented in the myths of fifth-century Athens, as utilized and interpreted by that culture, and the comic books of the early postwar period in America. Both cultures, feeling themselves besieged both from without and from within, I argue, sought out not only societal protection and defense from their respective enemies, but also definition of those enemies, as well as a means by which to gain more societal power. These themes can be readily found in the myths and comic books under examination here.

These two cultures, I found, reacted to their analogous conditions in the fifth century and the late 1940s and 1950s in their display, in both mythology and comic books, of what I will call the “Cold War Mentality”: these cultures, following the defeat of an outside aggressor, and subsequently facing a new threat to their internal and external security, exhibited three linearly interconnected features: first, heightened patriotism, usually exemplified by individuals – real or constructed – with domestic connections, who exhibit tendencies towards protecting the homeland and, especially, its ideological investments; second, identification of the other, a threat which manifests itself both without and within a culture and whose existence was viewed as detrimental to the culture’s ideological survival; and third, an attempt by male society to take control of women in society and place the psychologically important powers believed to be inherent in women under the aegis of the male sphere in an effort to bolster the nation against its foes.

The first chapter will deal with patriotism, showing how both the myths of Theseus and selected superhero comic books put forth a similar “catechism” of patriotism, a didactic tool to
teach society how properly to display the patriotic mores of society. Specifically, the chapter will
discuss, in terms of myth, the subtle rejection over the course of the fifth century of the Pan-
Hellenic hero Herakles at Athens (formerly a representative of the Peisistratid ruling family) in
favor of the Athenian hero Theseus, whose early legends, it will be argued. This will be
compared to the patriotic footing of comic book heroes during the early cold war, including such
characters as DC Comics’ Superman and Batman, whose stories themselves seem to display –
consciously or unconsciously – the proper ways to behave as an astute American patriot.

The second chapter will deal with conceptions of the other. Fifth-century Athens and
early Cold War America each possessed its own conception of the other. Scholars note that the
Athenians, following the Persian War, often represented their Persian enemies as Amazons in
their public art, viewing them as others with a mix of dangerous and virtuous characteristics.
However, it will be argued that the Spartans, with their oligarchic worldview and Doric ethnicity
(as distinct from the democratic worldview and Ionian ethnicity shared by Athenians) also
represented an other worthy of Amazonian representation as a largely ideological, and not
necessarily physical, threat. In the 1950s comics, a favorite villain found in science fiction
comics was the outer space alien, a creature capable not only of invasion from outside but also
infiltration from within. Scholarship has tended to ignore the belligerent comic book aliens of EC
comics, who will be identified in this chapter as creatures representing largely an ideological
threat. Thus, it will be seen that both Athenian and American fears of the other are based not on
fears for physical safety, but anxieties about the death of their respective ways of life.

The third chapter will deal with the treatment of women in Athenian myth and postwar
comics. Previous scholars have stated that Athenian women were conceived of by male society
as inferiors and obstacles to male power in the fifth century, and that, likewise, American
women’s increased power during the 1940s was seen as a threat to be curtailed by their returning husbands in the 1950s. I argue that myth and comics of those respective eras say something else: indeed, in both Athenian myths and American comic books, it would seem that women are conceived of as powerful beings, a power that, through domesticity, might be harnessed and used by men to fend off the coming dangers of the Spartan and Communist menaces.
CHAPTER I
SUPERMEN PAST AND PRESENT: TEACHING PATRIOTISM IN FIFTH-CENTURY
ATHENS AND POSTWAR AMERICA

Patriotism can – and should – be seen as a protective instinct in society. The individual at
the heart of the concept, the patriot, is most often viewed as someone who stands up for the
inherent ideals of (and extols the virtues of) a certain political entity, whether it is a particular
culture, province, nation, ethnic group, etc. John Somerville noted this in 1981 when he stated
that “patriotism…, literally and historically means love of one’s fatherland, one’s people, which
love [sic] during millennia since the beginning of civilization has been most closely associated
with willingness to risk one’s life on the field of battle in defense of one’s fatherland and
people.”\(^1\)

Patriots seek the salvation of a particular cultural (etc.) entity – usually over the salvation
of an opponents’: they believe that their particular entity’s ideologies and facets should be
protected and enabled to spread, should be fostered and grow. Thus, part and parcel of the
concept of patriotism is the protection of a worldview perceived to be fragile and besieged. The
patriot, at heart, then, is the protector of an entity, and its beliefs, which seems to be in danger of
passing away.\(^2\)

It is logical, then, that patriotism should, like edelweiss, “bloom and grow” in times of
trouble and adversity, and especially war, when the entity in question is at its most vulnerable.
Entities exhibiting what I have termed the “Cold War mentality,” which, for the purposes of this
thesis, appears during a time of ideological combat with a foreign other immediately following a
prolonged military struggle, would exhibit elements of this kind of patriotism, which not only

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seeks to protect its particular political entity, but also, as part of the ultimate shield, causes it to spread.³

The question is, of course, when seeking out so elusive a concept as patriotism, especially as defined here, where can it be found, and how is it disseminated? Here it will be argued that this patriotism can be identified in the cultural products of two particular entities experiencing this “Cold War mentality,” despite disparate temporal and geographical locations. In this case, it may be found in our test studies of the mythology – and the uses thereof – of fifth century Athens, and the comic books of the early Cold War era in America, two such entities experiencing, and exhibiting, the “Cold War mentality.” Indeed, it will be seen that both cultures used these respective media – whether consciously or not – as a sort of catechism of patriotism to teach their citizens the ways in which a correct patriot should live their life.⁴

It should come as no surprise that the myths and comic books discussed here reflected the prevailing political and cultural winds, and acted not so much as explicit propaganda but instead as a reflection of the society’s prevailing mindset. Because the introduction provided an explanation of Athenian and American anxieties over foreign relations during their respective “Cold Wars”, this chapter will begin with a discussion of the interior struggles firing patriotism in those eras. As we shall see, each society discovered that it was under attack both from without and from within, made attempts to deal with these threats, and utilized rhetoric to help comfort and galvanize the public.⁵

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³ Somerville, 568.


Following Athens’ shift to democracy in 506 B.C. and the triumphs and disasters of the Persian Wars twenty years later, the polis found itself not only almost immediately at odds with its political and military rival, Sparta, but also faced, as Andrew Stewart notes, with a growing population which included an influx of tradesmen, slaves, and foreigners. By 450, as an explicit token of this turn of events, the Athenians created a new term to define those non-Athenian residents, “metic,” and the issue of who was to be excluded and included under the aegis of citizenship was more fervently discussed. Such class definition, not entirely new to the period, exhibited itself in other, albeit not necessarily innovative, ways into the fifth century: the middle class of Athenians came to be seen as the guardians of the polis’s morality, and Athenian culture’s art glorified and depicted a reserved “culture of restraint.” Class-consciousness became a hallmark of patriotism and ideological protection in ancient Athens.

In the early days of the Cold War, America, too, believed itself to be beset by a threat, one which also came from within as well as without: Communism as an idea. No less an official than J. Edgar Hoover, in his 1958 work *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*, declared Communism “a threat to humanity and to each of us.…. Communism is the major menace of our time. Today it threatens the very existence of our Western civilization.” He took note of “Communist efforts to infiltrate our American way of...

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declaring that Communism was a dark mirror-image of America, where “evil is depicted as good, terror as justice, hate as love, and obedience to a foreign master as patriotism.”

These feelings were common throughout the preceding decade. Alan Nadel notes that anti-Communist religious fervor came to the fore and took a religious turn in American politics during the early- and mid-1950s, as the 1953 inaugural parade of Dwight D. Eisenhower featured a “float for God,” and one year later the Pledge of Allegiance was revised to include the phrase “‘under God,’ thus distinguishing [America] from the totalitarian, atheist bloc of Communist-dominated countries.” Religious belief, thus, was among the defining characteristics of the patriot in the early days of the Cold War, incorporating within it all of the ingredients necessary to protect America from the outside.

We can see from the preceding that both Athens of the fifth century and America of the postwar world viewed themselves as externally and internally threatened. In Athens, not only was the Spartan menace looming over the horizon, but social instability that might arise as a result of the influx of metics was on the public mind. As a result, a newly-heightened sense of class consciousness developed to help protect the citizens’ wonted ways. Similarly, in postwar America, fears of internal and external Communist infiltration led to a heightened sense of religiosity, marking Americans as separate from their irreligious Communist opponents. Such beliefs, however, went beyond rhetoric, as we shall see.

The heightened class consciousness of Athens, a protective measure symptomatic of the effects of the Persian conflicts as well as the escalating hostilities with Sparta, led in 451 to the

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9 Ibid, vi.
10 Ibid, 319.
passing of the statesman Pericles’s law which held that Athenian citizenship would be granted only to those who were born to both mothers and fathers of Athenian origin – a measure encouraging inter-Athenian marriage in an effort to keep the polis’s threatened blood clean.\textsuperscript{12} In an Athens besieged, it would seem, by perils from without and within, such a law would have seemed a patriotic defense (and conservation) of Athenian tradition for, as has been noted, “family and country were usually associated, not opposed, in the mind of a Greek”; thus, where one was weak, so was the other.\textsuperscript{13}

In the United States, too, fears about Communists went beyond mere rhetoric regarding Communist atheism. This was revealed forcefully in the public opinions of the U.S. government, which painted the USSR as not only atheistic and immoral but, ultimately, as “the ‘Anti-Christ,’”\textsuperscript{14} a feeling which ultimately carried over into the beliefs and worldviews of the public at large,\textsuperscript{15} who discovered “that the United States was ‘imminently threatened by a massive ideologically based assault upon everything Americans valued.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, by July of 1946 nearly 70 percent of Americans believed that people belonging to the Communist party should be excluded from government employment; by 1947, 61 percent believed that Communist Party members were wholly devoted to the USSR. Even the U.S. Chamber of Commerce got into the act, issuing a pamphlet demanding loyalty tests for workers on state payrolls. Fears about Communism and its effects on America often commingled with anxiety regarding not only


\textsuperscript{14} Sorenson, 171.


\textsuperscript{16} Sorenson, 171.
unease about atomic war, but also more localized, comparatively mundane social ills such as organized crime, juvenile delinquency, possible creeping Communist ideologies in American education, and the overall weakening of American culture.\textsuperscript{17}

Again, we can see that Athenian and American fears for their safety went beyond mere patriotic rhetoric to social action. In Athens, the fervor resulted in citizen-support for the Periclean law limiting citizenship, and the increasing views of the American society-at-large translated not only into more and more anxious mindsets as seen in opinion polls, but fears that the entire society was at risk, and all facets needed protection if America were to survive. Such anxieties in both societies may have been assuaged, as we will see below, by rhetoric – both written and oral – helping to tell the staunch (or aspiring) Athenian and American patriots what they could do for the effort.

Pericles, in Thucydides’ account of his Funeral Oration speech, made the ideal state of Athenian patriotism and class in such a time explicitly known to the populace. “In this land of ours,” he stated, “there have always been the same people living from generation to generation up till now, and they, by their courage and their virtues, have handed it on to us, a free country.”\textsuperscript{18} Further espousing the greatness of democracy in the face of its enemies, he noted that the Athenian political structure was controlled by the will of the majority, not the minority,\textsuperscript{19} and that not only was Athens “free and tolerant in our private lives,” but “no one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Jo Anne Brown, “‘A is for Atom, B is for Bomb’: Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948-1963,” \textit{The Journal of American History} 75, no. 1 (June, 1988): 70-71; Hendershot, 4; Sorenson, 176, 183;

\textsuperscript{18} Thucydides, II.36.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}, II.37.
Further declaring Athens to be an open, inviting city, welcoming to the entirety of the known world, Pericles made it known that the polis’s greatness was not predicated on total inclusion, but rather on the citizenship of “men who were ashamed to fall below a certain standard.” Athens, thus, was “a model to others,” whose “adventurous spirit has forced an entry into every sea and into every land; and everywhere we have left behind us everlasting memorials of good done to our friends, or suffering inflicted on our enemies.” “I declare,” Pericles stated, “that our city is an education to Greece.”

In stating why Communism must be fought, and how, J. Edgar Hoover also took it upon himself, however indirectly, to define the patriotic American. All Americans, he noted, were to keep themselves up-to-date on the Communist menace, for “if our government is to remain free, it needs the help of every patriotic man, woman, and child.” Indeed, “there may well be occasions when everyone might have the opportunity to help expose and prevent attempts at espionage, sabotage, and other types of subversive activity.” In addition to being educated about Communism, and situated in a position to stop potential terrorist activities, patriotic Americans were also to be alert, as well as religious, for “the very essence of our faith in

21 Ibid, II.39.
22 Ibid, II.43.
23 Ibid, II.36.
24 Ibid, II.41.
25 Ibid.
26 Hoover, v, vii.
27 Ibid, viii.
28 Ibid, 309. Italics mine.
29 Ibid, 312.
democracy and our fellow man is rooted in a belief in a Supreme Being.”\textsuperscript{30} All of these features of the patriot were important, as “we need the help of all loyal Americans…. [I]n a democracy like ours, citizenship carries with it not only rights but obligations. One of these is to do our part to preserve, protect, and defend the United States against all enemies, whether domestic or foreign.”\textsuperscript{31}

Such fears of impending doom from Soviet ideology were helpful in this time for fostering a national feeling of togetherness in the United States – the threat of a common enemy engendered a collective feeling that the country was responsible not only for the good of its own land, but for the world-at-large, in the face of monolithic Communism.\textsuperscript{32} In this environment, as Hoover stated, Americans were allowed to speak out, and “honest dissent should not be confused with disloyalty. A man has the right to think what he wishes: that’s the strength of our form of government.”\textsuperscript{33} However, American patriots were not to rest on their laurels: Hoover exhorted them to action to create America as it should be,\textsuperscript{34} and further stated that “most Americans believe that our light of freedom is a shining light. As Americans we should stand up, speak of it, and let the world see this light, rather than conceal it.”\textsuperscript{35}

American patriots, then, were to be active and alert, ready for defense from both aggressive forces outside and inside the culture, strengthened in their beliefs by religious devotion, evangelizing the American weltanschauung throughout the rest of the world – perhaps

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 322.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 310. Italics original.

\textsuperscript{32} Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “After the Long War,” \textit{Foreign Policy} 94 (Spring, 1994): 22, 26, 27.

\textsuperscript{33} Hoover, 312.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 335.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 334.
the ultimate act of protection. Similarly, Athenian patriots were outspoken and tolerant people of a certain class and standing, who nonetheless found themselves enthusiastic representatives of the greatest city in all of Greece, a city whose influence rightly stretched throughout the Aegean world.

With this analysis, the question that now arises is whether such diverse and highly protective patriotic beliefs find expression and outlet in the depictions of Athenian mythology of the fifth century, and in the comic books of the early years of the American postwar period. In terms of Athens, this question can be answered when one examines the transition in public myth that took place in Athens after the fall of the Peisistratid tyranny in the mid 6th century: the descent of the hero Herakles from popularity and the rise in popularity of the more local Athenian hero, Theseus.

As the art historian John Boardman famously argued, Herakles (often Latinized as “Hercules”), the strongman-hero of ancient Greece, enjoyed a high degree of popularity in the mid-6th century under the tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons, and was increasingly represented in art of the period, accompanied by sly changes in the iconography of the time, indicating purposeful manipulation of Herakles’s myths for political ends. Peisistratus used Herakles not only to represent Athens, but also to represent himself, drawing on the iconographic linkage of Herakles with the goddess Athena, patroness of Athens.36

However, following the ouster of the Peisistratid line, the popularity of Herakles dropped precipitously, and he came increasingly to be replaced by Theseus, though, as Boardman notes, he was too deeply a part of Greek culture to disappear at Athens.37 What can account for this

shift? I will argue that, aside from any single explanation usually offered by scholars to account for this faltering, the decline of Herakles is due largely to a cultural embarrassment in Greece at his image – the collective inconsistencies and problems relating to the hero’s iconography as a whole came to be disturbing and irrelevant to the patriotic fervor of fifth-century Athens.

The first strike against Herakles was that he was not a local Athenian champion. Herakles was revered throughout Greece as a hero and, for some, a god which, though supposedly making him an individual powerful and worthy of iconographic use, went against the grain of the kind of Athenian exceptionalism voiced by Pericles and the cultural climate of that city – Athens needed an Athenian hero. Another difficulty facing Herakles was that he had numerous connections to the East, making him unacceptable due to associations made between the East and Athens’ old enemy, Persia. This difficulty is well documented on one hand by Beth Cohen, who notes that Herakles’s use of his iconic, wooden club in Athenian art increases in the middle decades of the fifth century at the expense of his bow and arrow – even in depictions of myths where they were explicitly used – weapons associated with Persian archers and deemed fundamentally un-Greek (philosophically, at least, Greeks disdained archery, ideally wishing to engage opponents face-to-face). The increased depiction of Herakles’s club and the loss of his archery kit, Cohen argues, “is best understood as an artistic response to the unbridled Greek spirit after the Persian War.” Thus, the Athenians themselves felt the need to transform the offending iconography to suit their changing tastes and socio-political climate.

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39 Cohen, 695-715.

40 Ibid, 714.
Another eastern association rendering Herakles as a problematic figure is a particular story from his legendary lexicon, the myth of Herakles and Omphale. In this tale, Herakles is sold into slavery in Asia and is bought by Omphale, the queen of Lydia, and subsequently is made to perform a number of tasks in her service, including acting as her lover. In addition, Herakles was made to wear women’s clothing and spin wool thread during his servitude. While Elmer G. Shur has noted that this story would have caused difficulties for Athenians based on the fact that Herakles was owned by a woman, he glosses over the fact that Omphale is an eastern woman, causing immediate associations to be made, as with the bow and arrow, with servitude to Persia. To have a great Greek hero not only sold into slavery to an Asian queen, but also made to be her servant and sexual plaything, emasculated in women’s clothes, would have been distasteful to Athenians who had a vision of themselves, as Pericles did, as exemplar Greek citizens. And, as Shur notes, the archaeological evidence bears this out: there is a distinct dearth of depictions of the myth of Herakles and Omphale on vases of the fifth century.

Hurting the reputation of Herakles further in the fifth century are his associations with that greatest of Athenian rivals, Sparta. Herakles was purported to be the ancestor of the Dorians in general, an ethnic group to which the Spartans belonged (and which was diametrically opposed to the Athenian ethnic group, the Ionians), and also the father of the Spartan polis in particular. As well, the earliest of Herakles’s twelve labors took place on the Greek Peloponnesus, the stomping grounds of Sparta, and the Spartans subsequently established or

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42 Shur, 251-263.

planned several colonies named in the hero’s honor.\textsuperscript{44} Such associations with their growing rival would also have hurt Herakles’s esteem in the eyes of the Athenians, and, combined with his eastern associations and connections to a fallen political regime, would have made him a decidedly problematic choice in explicitly representing Athens in this increasingly patriotic political and social climate. Similar cultural differences – especially those relating to religion – that would allow Americans, a continent and more than two millennia away, to separate themselves from the Communist Soviet Union nearly two millennia later.

Returning to Greece, one must wonder what, on the other hand, should make Theseus such an attractive choice over Herakles for the Athenians? As Valerij Gouschin notes, the popularity of both heroes waxed and waned in the century prior to the Persian Wars:

\begin{quote}
At the beginning of the sixth century his [Theseus’] image was almost as popular in Athenian art as that of Heracles; but in the middle of that century, Heracles became extremely popular in Athenian mythology and art. The obvious flowering of the Theseus saga in art can be seen from the end of the sixth century.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Some scholars seem to credit the rise of Theseus, as with the fall of Herakles, to the decline of the Peisistratids, or at least to a new era in politics in general. This theory, as we shall see, does not tell the whole story. However, it cannot be denied that Theseus began his ascendancy in Athenian iconography in the late sixth century, beginning around 525 B.C. and continuing through the early 5th century, notably on vases (a fact some have tied to the rise in democracy at Athens during the period; indeed, some have tied him to the Athenian politician Cleisthenes). His


religious cult at this time began to flourish, and by 475, Theseus appeared as a full-blown national hero.\textsuperscript{46}

Theseus, in this period, comes to represent “all the best qualities of the Athenian citizen”\textsuperscript{47}: a favorite of Athena, he was said to have quashed tyrannies, and not only upheld but, by the lore of the fourth century, founded Athenian democracy.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, so revered was Theseus that legend told of his armored apparition leading the Greeks to victory over the Persians at Marathon, and the Athens’ postwar reconstruction was done in Theseus’s name, perhaps because Theseus himself came to be associated with the ancient founding of the Athenian polis.\textsuperscript{49}

Theseus’s popularity also wound itself into other myths not usually associated with him, and in the period was inserted into the infamous Calydonian Boar Hunt, and even became an Argonaut, traveling with Jason on his famous voyage. “The popular expression of this trend of heaping numerous feats on Theseus in fifth-century Athens,” Davie notes, “was the proverb… ‘Theseus had a hand in it’.”\textsuperscript{50} Adding to his popularity as a local hero in this time was the reputed discovery of Theseus’s corpse on the island of Scyros. Its re-entry into Athens was met with much pomp.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, so well-liked was Theseus that even Pericles reputedly took advantage of his popularity and supposedly appeared dressed as Theseus in a depiction of a

\textsuperscript{46} Boardman, “Eleusis,” 2; Boardman, “Unconvinced,” 158; Davie, 25, 26; Glynn, 85; Gouschin, 180; Jenifer Neils, “The Loves of Theseus: An Early Cup by Oltos,” \textit{American Journal of Archaeology} 85, no. 2 (April, 1981): 177; Padilla, 13.

\textsuperscript{47} Davie, 25.


\textsuperscript{50} Davie, 27.

\textsuperscript{51} Gouschin, 169.
battle with Amazons in one of the Parthenon’s artworks. Just as with the superheroes that will be later discussed, it seemed that there was little Theseus could not do for Athens, or its citizens.

But, the question still remains, what made Theseus such a popular figure that the Athenians would revere him so highly? Much work has already been done on this subject. The most frequently voiced theory is that Athens, for a variety of reasons – from desiring to have a specifically Athenian (or even Ionian) hero, to counteracting the ascendant power of Sparta in the late sixth century – wished to be represented by a hero as splendid as Herakles was considered to be. This monist view is, unfortunately, rather simplistic and overlooks other evidence, which I will shortly relate. A more fruitful and interesting line of inquiry has led scholars to investigate the various and sundry possible associations encoded in the hero’s mythology. One interesting instance mined by scholars is the association to be found in Theseus’ parentage – he is the son of Poseidon, Greek god of the sea, connecting him doubly to the Ionian ethnicity, as both he and Poseidon are connected with that group, associating him with Ionian peoples throughout Athens’ burgeoning empire; and secondly connecting him, through the power of the sea, to representing the Athenian fleet, which had played so large a part in the winning of the Persian Wars.

While all of these avenues are valuable in their own ways (and, indeed, contributed much to the present study both conceptually and factually), one avenue that has lacked focused

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52 Ibid, 176.
scholarly interest is the so-called “labors” of Theseus, which chronicles his journey from his birthplace of Troezen, along the coast, to Athens, the home of his human father, Aegeus, king of Athens. Along this journey, Theseus encounters a series of robbers, each of whom kill wayfarers in clever – and sometimes grotesque – ways. Theseus slays them by dealing out a kind of poetic justice, killing them as they killed their naïve victims. In these tales, the first robber, Corunetes, carried a club of bronze, with which he killed travelers. Theseus took the club from him, killed him with it, and went on his way, meeting Sinis, a robber who tied his victims between two bent trees and then let the trees go, tearing the hapless people in half. Theseus wrestled him to the ground and disposed of him likewise. Next, he killed a large wild sow which was frightening the local farmers, and then met the robber Sciron, who sat on a rock and forced travelers to wash his feet, afterwards kicking them off a neighboring cliff into the sea. Theseus declined to wash his feet, picked him up, and unceremoniously threw him over the cliff. Next he met the wrestler Cercyon, who squeezed men to death. Theseus wrestled him and broke his head open. Finally, Theseus met Procrustes, a robber who fit travelers to a special bed he’d made – if they were too short, he stretched and killed them to fit; if too tall, they were cut down to size. Theseus took Procrustes, sized him to his bed, and killed him. He then continued his journey into Attica unhindered.\footnote{Graves, 321, 325, 327-330, 332.}

What is striking about these tales is how easily past scholarship has explained away their potential cultural and symbolic importance to fifth century Athenians. D. G. Roberts states that these stories, perhaps based on past rituals, were merely tacked on to Theseus’s legacy to make him appear more like Herakles, giving the hero his own series of labors.\footnote{Roberts, 105.} Talfourd Ely is of a similar opinion, noting that “the triumphs of Theseus over the robbers who infested the Isthmus
are perhaps somewhat monotonous, and impress one as mere imitations of the adventures of his greatest contemporary, Herakles.”  

H. J. Walker writes these tales off as simply a series of myths that “celebrates an imaginary Athenian mastery over the entire region,” while Sophie Mills perhaps comes closest to the mark when she notes that the stories portray Theseus as a defeater of tyrants and a founder of democracy by, in art, associating him with iconography common to Aristogeiton and Harmodios, Athenians who drove out the Peisistratid family of tyrants.

Despite these broad statements, only one of the myths appears to have attracted any detailed scholarly attention, that of Theseus’s slaying of Skiron. That tale, while it has been described in passing as a “patriotic legend” in which Theseus defeats a “foe of the state,” seems to be more interesting to scholars either for its potential origins as an Attic fertility rite, or other errata, and not any possible contemporary importance it may have had to fifth century Athens. This is somewhat disturbing, as it may be shown that these legends, when looked at with new eyes, may have served an important function when considered in the context of Athenian patriotism. I argue that these tales – compact, easily remembered, and rich in symbolism – may have acted as a sort of catechism, or primer, of Athenian patriotism and ideology, reminding citizens of their duties and of the greatness of the Athenian state, which in the fifth century seemed besieged from without and within – similar to the ways in which comic books of the early postwar decade helped to teach a roundabout form of patriotism.

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57 Ely, 272-273.
58 Walker, 51
59 Mills, 28-29.
60 Ely, 274.
61 Roberts, 105.
When looking at the first tale, that of Theseus’s besting of Corunetes, this becomes strikingly clear. Corunetes, as noted above, had a name meaning “cudgel-man,” a man who carries a club and uses it to slay passers-by. In the tale, Theseus takes this club and beats the robber to death with it, afterwards using it as his own weapon: “Delighted with its size and weight, he proudly carried it about ever afterwards; and though he himself had been able to parry its murderous swing, in his hands it never failed to kill.” This tale has a meaning that can be read twofold. First, in slaying a club-wielding robber, Theseus has symbolically slain Herakles, Athens’s past hero, who was himself iconically associated with the use of a club; by his assumption of the club as his own weapon, not only has he rid Athens of Herakles and the political and cultural difficulties associated with his image, but he has also replaced him as Athens’s representative, an important gesture to make in his first act as a mythological hero. Secondly, by slaying a stand-in for Herakles, he has also symbolically slain the tyrant Peisistratus and his offspring, who associated themselves with Herakles – an interpretation made all the more credible for, as was noted above, in art Theseus was to become associated with the Peisistratid-killing tyrannicides. By accomplishing two such important feats in his first symbolic heroic act, Theseus has not only laid claim to Herakles’s place in Athenian culture, but also, as earlier noted, justified his reputation of freeing Athens from the rule of tyrants.

Theseus’s second act, that of the defeat of Sinis, who tore people apart between two trees, may be interpreted in a similar light. As Mills notes, Theseus is often credited in legend with bringing the region of Attica into union with Athens. Here, in the case of Sinis, who seeks to tear

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62 Graves, 327-328.

63 Ibid, 328.

64 It is important that such a slaying remain symbolic and not explicit for, as noted earlier, Herakles still played an important part in Athenian cultural life.
wayfarers asunder, Theseus’s righteous killing of the robber symbolically unified Attica and Athens by ridding them of any differences that may have torn them apart – with Sinis dead, the land and its people will remain joined together. His next feat that of killing the deadly Crommyonian Sow, which drove farmers away from their fields, may be interpreted as Theseus’ defense of the poor or the common man, who even Pericles, in his speech, exalted.

Theseus’s next act, that of defeating Sciron – who, on the pretense of having travelers wash his feet, kicked them down a cliff to their deaths – by throwing him over that same cliff, may be seen as the defeat of monarchy or (more relevant, perhaps, to a fifth-century mindset) oligarchy, which had already been established as the presiding political form of Sparta and her allies. By throwing Sciron – whose wish to have travelers wash his feet smacks of aristocratic pretensions – into the sea, Theseus is rejecting outside political influences that, when bent to, backfire on the people. The following act, the slaying of Cercyon the robber-wrestler, who squeezed his victims to death, by wrestling him more powerfully, represents a belief in Athens’ own military might: the state can defeat its opponent, idealized perhaps as either Persia or Sparta (or both) in the Athenian mind, at their own military game without trouble. Theseus’s act of slaying the final bandit, Procrustes, who fit travelers to his bed by either cutting them off or stretching them, relates to the official Athenian ideal of democratic equality: by slaying the man who wishes to make all people the same size, he is allowing differences to exist in Athens, the kinds of social differences Pericles defended when he stated that the poor may serve in politics, \(^{65}\) and that “we are free and tolerant in our private lives….\(^{66}\)

Ely’s previously noted criticism of these stories, that they are uninteresting in their similarity, would actually have been a benefit to the average Athenian rather than a hindrance:

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\(^{65}\) Thucydides, II.37.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.
the stories, blessed with a memorable structure, would be easy to remember and just as easy to repeat and relate to others. A simple series of six labors (interestingly, half as many as Herakles possessed, which in itself may be significant), repetitive in their construction, with relatively simple iconography, would have especially aided Athenians in remembrance of what an Athenian should be, based on Theseus’s actions: an Athenian was against tyranny, and represented by a hero just as powerful as Herakles; Athenians were a unified people, fighting for a common cause; Athenians protected the poor and fought against oligarchy and outside forms of government; Athenians were powerful militarily; Athenians were tolerant of individual differences. In short, Athenians protected the interests of the state and home, and furthered her interests abroad. In a time of difficulties coming from both inside and outside of the Athenian state, this simple catechism of symbolic events, repetitious and easily remembered, would enforce Athenian pride and remembrance of what it meant to be a citizen, and thus aid in the necessary protective impulse brought on by the “Cold War mentality” of the fifth century. Such a catechism can also be found, albeit in a less compact form, in the superhero comics of the early Cold War.

In American comic books of this era – specifically superhero comic books – these constructs and ideologies found full expression. In the first instance, these comic books portray the alert, ever-ready, knowledgeable citizen, in the guise of the superheroes themselves, fighting for equality and upholding standard, postwar American values at home and abroad. An exemplar of this is the 1947 Batman story “The Case of the Famous Foes!” In this tale, three harmless inmates in an insane asylum, each believing they are, respectively, Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin
Franklin, and George Washington, are bamboozled by a criminal who uses their innate patriotism to aid him in a series of heists. Batman and Robin are soon on the trail of the false founding fathers, who, as the spitting images of their namesakes, proceed to charm Washington, D.C., and are hailed as heroes returned from the dead. Seeing through their façade, however, Batman lures the three unwitting poseurs to the U.S. Capitol, where he unMASKs their treacherous leader as the aptly-named criminal mastermind, Wiley Derek.  

Batman and Robin, the representatives of the American citizens in this story, are not evangelizing and standing up for American virtues in this tale so much as they are protecting America from wolves in sheep’s clothing who would lead them astray – in other words, patriotism in the wrong hands can be a dangerous thing. The tale suggests, as Hoover does, that it takes a true American patriot, educated and prepared to fight against the forces of domestic subversives, to separate true patriots, and patriotism, from opportunistic fakes who seek to destroy America and its way of life. Even the well-meaning-but-blind can be led astray, as the duped asylum inmates, unknowingly complicit in criminal activities, discovered to their sorrow:

Lincoln: “But I thought the wallet I stole contained an assassin’s notes!”
Washington: “That rogue…said the satchel I took contained a bomb to blow up my monument!”
Franklin: “And I was told the documents I took were about to be destroyed by traitors!”

It is only the educated, watchful, ready patriotic American of Hoover’s imaginings, then, who can protect the country against demagogues and pretenders who would ruin it.

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We can see that this parallels the earlier Athenian Theseus tales regarding his defeats of Sciron and Sinis. Just as Batman and Robin can see through the façade of false patriotism (and patriots) and fight those who use patriots for their own gain, Theseus is able to see through the false guises of Sciron and Sinis, who seem to be amiable fellow-travelers or local inhabitants, but instead harbor dangerous political ideologies: Sciron representing monarchy, and Sinis representing social division. They would seek to use travelers for their own nefarious purposes but Theseus, the ideal Athenian patriot, sees through it all.

But how can aspiring American patriots be taught to be on the alert? We see in comic books of this era a helpful theme: that patriotism begins at home. In the August, 1958 Superman tale, “The Three Magic Wishes: The Girl of Steel Part III – Superman’s Return to Krypton,” the Man of Tomorrow discovers that he himself derives from a family of active, eager patriots. When Jimmy Olson, Superman’s friend and co-worker, is granted a magic wish, he wishes that an increasingly homesick Superman had the ability to visits his home planet of Krypton in the past and meet his long-dead parents, Lara and Jor-El. Shot back in time and space, Superman meets his parents as young lovers, and discovers that, unbeknownst to him, they were employed before his birth as undercover Kryptonian agents infiltrating an “anti-democratic” spy-ring. However, when the ring is exposed, Lara and Jor-El’s credentials as government agents are accidentally destroyed; they are unfairly convicted of espionage and sent into exile along with the rest of the spies. Superman follows his parents into exile on a small asteroid, and there defeats the leader of the enemy spy-ring (sent into exile along with them), enabling Jor-El and Lara to return to Krypton and clear their records.69

In this, Superman, though long removed from parents he never knew, discovers that his own patriotic and protectionist leanings emerge from a heritage of service to the state begun by his parents in their youth. Superman, through his own parents’ support of democracy and active efforts on behalf of a regime similar to that of the United States (albeit on another planet, in another time), is shown to be, through virtue of his bloodline, to be a patriot of the first order, and by implication an example to others, one who carries on the “family business,” as it were. Patriotism, the comic books say – seen by Hoover as the duty of every American – thus begins with the family.

Similarly, we find that for the Athenians, the robber-myths of Theseus make a similar statement about the beginnings of patriotism. Theseus’s journey, it should be said, is not undertaken with the goal of defeating all of the bandits – he is seeking to reach Attica; the robbers he meets and slays are obstacles. However, just as each of the robbers and their defeats are symbolic anagrams of Athenian patriotism, so, too, is the end of the long journey: Theseus reaches Athens as a young man educated in the ways of the world, experienced after defeating so many thugs. Likewise, as a symbol of the ideal Athenian patriot, he has also accumulated knowledge of what it means to be an Athenian, and has brought it to his new home of Athens. Thus, just as Cold War patriotism in the American comic books begins at home, so too does Athenian patriotism begin, ever after, in Athens.

With such patriotism already instilled at home, the American patriots, represented by their superhero brethren, were also to be assertive about educating other countries about American patriotism, in an effort to spread American interests and policies overseas. One story with such a theme, “Batman and Robin in Scotland Yard,” appeared in the April, 1946 issue of Detective Comics. With a criminal copying the crimes of Sherlock Holmes’ greatest nemesis,
Prof. Moriarty, on the loose in London, there seems to be but one course of action for the agents
of Scotland Yard: call on American supersleuths Batman and Robin:70

Inspector Gow: “The chap’s a genius, chief! He changes the crimes of the
fictional Moriarty just enough so it’s no good studying the Holmes stories.”

Chief: “And we’ve got no Sherlock to out guess him! Gow, it occurs to me that
there are a pair [sic] of phenomenal crime specialists in Gotham City, U.S.A.!”
Inspector Gow: “Batman and Robin! Chief, why not ask them to lend a hand?”71

Arriving in London, Batman and Robin are soon hot on the trail of the would-be Moriarty, and
after some investigating, catch up with him and his gang, much to “Moriarty’s” surprise:

Moriarty: “Batman! Robin! But – you don’t belong in England!”

Batman: “We belong wherever we’re needed!”72

Further hi-jinx ensues, however, before the dynamic duo finally capture Moriarty and his crew,
after which a statue of the two heroes, in full costume, rushing into action, is enshrined in the
Scotland Yard Museum.73

Here, Batman and Robin, representative of the active, educated, prototypical American
patriot, brought up in a patriotic household, are portrayed as examples to the world of how to act
in the face of adversity – so much so that the two heroes are called upon by a foreign agency to
do that agency’s investigating. Emblematic of their stature, and their belief in American ideals, is
their cry of “We belong wherever we’re needed!” encapsulating the very heart of Hoover’s ideal

70 Don Cameron and Win Mortimer, “Batman and Robin in Scotland Yard,” Detective Comics 110 (April, 1946), in
71 Ibid, 100.
72 Ibid, 104. Italics mine.
American, shining the light of the United States’ institutions into the benighted corners of the world. Their patriotism is unchecked by the daunting task of traveling to another country to unravel a mystery; and indeed, it is rewarded in the end by eternal enshrinement as shining examples to those whom they served.

A more explicit example of this belief in the efficacy and importance of American power overseas can be seen in the 1947 Superman story “Shakespeare’s Ghost Writer!” During a discussion with their newspaper editor, Perry White, about getting a raise, Clark Kent and his sometime love, Lois Lane, are accidentally shot back in time to the days of Shakespeare by an inventor’s unruly time ray. Traveling to London, Clark and Lois begin doing what they do best – journalism – by starting a newspaper in the city to make money. Superman helps build the necessary equipment, and meanwhile overhears nobles plotting to outlaw speaking out against the government. Incensed, the fledgling newspaper puts out an edition exposing the proposed laws. However, this act makes Clark and Lois targets of the local authorities, and they are attacked by the king’s goons, who attempt to destroy their press office. Under fire, the two inexplicably return to modernity at the last second, and are awarded their raise to boot.74

“Shakespeare’s Ghost Writer” states that, no matter where the American patriot travels, their values and their thirst for American ideals travels with them. These American patriotic virtues are means to fight those of the offenders:

King James: “These scurrilous pamphleteers have dared attack me openly! Not even the threat of the tower deters them! ... We must draw up new laws, fixing the most terrible punishments for those whose written or spoken words displease us!” Superman (overhearing the discussion):… As long as I have [X-ray vision and super-sensitive hearing] and as long as I’m connected with any newspaper – as much of the truth as I can discover will be told!”

The ways of others that an American patriot the likes of Superman finds distasteful are not to be left alone, but counteracted with American beliefs and know-how. American ways, deemed preferable by these heroes, are not only to be protected at home, but evangelized abroad, ensuring their continued existence in the face of foreign ideologies.

These two tales are also analogous of the tale from the early Theseus cycle regarding Cercyon, the robber who wrestled and killed his victims. In this tale, it will be remembered, Theseus defeated the wrestler by a show of superior strength, ideologically representative of the might of the Athenian military. Defeating Cercyon and exhibiting a belief in Athenian military might displays Athenian beliefs, similar to those of Pericles espoused earlier, that the mighty Athenians were rightfully able to spread their might throughout the Mediterranean and bring the torch of their own ways to those less enlightened.

Looking at the extended examples discussed in this chapter, it can be seen that the conceptions of patriotism found in the Theseus myths of fifth century Athens and the comic books of early postwar America have a clear connection: both feature heroes who seek, by their actions, to bolster patriotism and protectionism at home, and further it abroad. The Athenian Theseus, in his compact catechism of symbolic adventures, presents a powerful reminder of what Athens and Athenians stand for and should aspire to: in a time of increasing hostilities with Sparta and new class-based considerations at home, Athens would have felt itself vulnerable and in need of a way to preserve what it may have viewed as a fragile heritage. So, too, with the heroes of the American comic books – stories of travels through time and to foreign lands and adventures against patriotic poseurs allowed the rhyme and reason of American patriotism to be disseminated in a form usable and teachable to the reader. The patriotic heroes in these tales
were examples to others, men who could lead the way against the troubles that lurked around every corner.
CHAPTER II
AMAZONS, ALIENS AND THE OTHER: ATHENIAN AND AMERICAN VISIONS OF POLITICAL PERILS

One of the natural corollaries of patriotism is that there must be something for the patriot to defend against – a kind of enemy, either physical or mental, that possesses the characteristics and abilities to destroy what the patriot has sworn to protect. Such an outside force can (and has) often been put to use by particular groups in times of crisis (history is full of examples, both past and present, across cultures and geographies): Howard F. Stein noted that “group self-definition and cohesiveness are achieved by contrast with and opposition to a historic enemy that is perceived through projection as embodying disavowed characteristics of one’s own group.”\(^1\)

Thus patriots, in an attempt to safeguard their chosen beliefs in a time of trouble – such as the Greek Peloponnesian War era and the early postwar United States – would probably make use of such an “othered” figure, a stark mirror-image of what they believe in, to help draw like-minded people together and sharply define who is, and who is not, part of the in-group. Utilizing such a figure, a group might be able to form a better working unit, feeling a joining similarity between themselves and like-minded individuals, and a break from those who exhibit the darker, shameful inclinations that patriots and their comrades dare not express. With something to fight against, a group protecting a besieged ideology only becomes stronger.\(^2\)

Such concepts will be of particular interest and concern in this chapter, as imaginings of the enemy, of an other working for the downfall of society, permeated theme ancient Athens and the American postwar period. In both eras, the other – a lurking presence representing their own fears of how the present social order might spin out of control – occupied an important place in

\(^1\) Howard F. Stein, “The Indispensable Enemy and American-Soviet Relations,” *Ethis* 17, no. 4 (December, 1989): 480.

\(^2\) *Ibid*, 481, 484.
the cultural products of the day. In Athens, the other appeared as the Amazon warrior, the very antithesis of Athenian society. In the postwar American media, including comic books, the creeping Communist menace that threatened American stability was imagined as the alien from outer space – ugly, fierce, deceptive, and nigh-unstoppable.

These observations, however, are not new ones. That these two particular others existed as described above, and were thus portrayed in myth and media, has been written about, discussed, and recognized widely in the respective literature. The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to re-hash this foregoing scholarship, but to add new wrinkles to it. The mythic Amazons in fifth-century Athens were – scholars argue – frequently used in public artworks as an allegory of the defeated Persian enemy. However, it will be argued in this chapter that an alternate – or at least additional – reading of these fierce female figures may be plausibly made: that the Amazons, following the Persian Wars, represented a more pressing threat, that of the Spartans, foreign rivals of Athens, and their supporters at home.

In the second place, we will take a look at the alien other of the 1950s comic books as portrayed in EC Comics’ *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy* titles. The following arguments concerning these publications will show that EC comics’ treatments of the menacing “alien other” makes compelling implicit arguments concerning the alien others themselves; indeed, the stories place the onus of protection against the alien/Communist enemy on the shoulders of the individual, not the society.

What ties these two arguments together is not an exposé of the fact that both fifth-century Athens and postwar America imagined their ideological enemies as others: this observation is rudimentary and could apply to any time period. What is highly interesting for this discussion, and what relates Athens and America so closely in their conceptions of the other, is what their
imaginings of the other actually mean: both Amazons and Aliens, at their heart, represent troubling interior, not exterior, forces – they are both imagined not as wholly physically threatening but *ideologically* threatening; the aggressive actions they use are only means to an end. The other in this way truly corresponds to the model discussed above by Stein: an enemy is actually within the heart of the society, and depictions of it are used to keep it locked away. It will be helpful, first of all, to look at one of the more elusive of these enemies, the Amazon.

The Amazon myths and their public political/psychological uses are products of a veritable crossroads of Greek cultural concerns, “fabricated from cultural data concerning such matters as war, sex, ethnography, politics and…rites effecting the transition from…infancy to adulthood and marriage.”\(^3\) Thus, the ways in which the Greeks portrayed the Amazons gives us a degree of understanding of how the Greeks understood and felt about themselves. While the term Amazon today brings about thoughts of a grotesque, masculine woman bent on a sort of single-minded domination of the male, for the Greeks the Amazon was a subtler creature: a distinct, discreet representative of societal and cultural inversion, used to comment on the absurdity of alternatives to Greek civilization.\(^4\) The simplest way in which this othering was accomplished was to set the Amazons against their cultural cognates in Greece, the Greek women. Amazons were frequently employed as cautionary examples of the unchecked woman, representing an explicit rejection of the set standards of feminine Greek comportment. As such, Amazons

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3 Tyrrell, xiii.

represented a threat to the Greek male’s social and sexual mastery of society, and thus were seen in extremity as “the wild, untamed, unmarried, and potentially lustful female, the bestial in woman…” Added to this was the Amazon’s physical appearance: she was always beautiful, and often portrayed in the literature as possessing a powerful romantic interested in the men who wandered into her territory. A figure so potently tied to a deviant image of female sexuality was frequently only defeated through sexual subjugation to the male hero, restoring societal balance.

An Amazonian world was a matriarchal one, a fear that permeated the subconscious of male Greek society. The Amazons of myth led vigorous lives, stood their ground, and lived on militaristic terms, invading the traditionally male sphere of warfare and making it their own. This fearful image, however, was also somewhat tempered by Greek soldierly psychology: as exceptional fighters, having cast off any resemblance to the average Greek woman, the Amazons represented worthy opponents to Greek men, and in mythology a sort of macho cachet attended their defeat. Heroes prominently featured the defeat of an Amazon in their rolls of deeds, and Greek society itself touted an Amazonian defeat proudly. This dual identity as females succeeding at male work (and being admired for it) gave the Amazons a curious status as almost twilight figures without a world of their own. As Tyrrell notes, “the male prerogatives of ruling lands, enslaving neighbors, and pursuing a reputations are given to the Amazons…. [However] the Amazons, while gaining male attributes, retain their female bodies….”

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5 Hardwick, 17, 18; Stewart, 592.
6 Stewart, 580.
7 Stewart, 577, 579; Walcot, 42.
9 Tyrrell, 18.
What is most interesting about the Amazons as figured this way in the Greek mind is that, while they are ostensibly a military threat, their true destructive power lies in the political and cultural upheaval that the Amazons represent – matriarchy, a mirror-image of standard Greek cultural practices, a society ruled by unruly women. The Amazons in this way do not represent, by any means, a physical threat to Greek safety, but an ideological one. No individual Amazon will injure an individual Greek in real life – indeed, as a mythical character, that’s impossible; however, the ideologies that the Amazons represent in the Greek mind, if allowed to run free and take root in Greek society, could injure Hellenic culture as a whole. That is the power of the Amazon.

Elements of this duality were doubtless in the minds of Athenians when they first began to portray Amazons in their art, and as we move through history the nether realm of character inhabited by the Amazons takes on other characteristics. One early depiction of Amazons in Athens appeared around 575 B.C. in a representation of the ninth labor of Herakles, in which the hero was sent to retrieve the belt of the Amazonian queen. It is argued that this story’s appearance may have been connected with the rise of Pisistratus – the Amazons became political. Another popular myth regarding the Amazons appeared on art at the end of that century, and involved Theseus who, with a companion, journeyed to the Amazon homeland of Themyscira. Once there, the hero raped and kidnapped an Amazon and carried her back to Athens, hotly pursued by her countrywomen who, upon reaching Athens, besieged the city. The Amazons, however, are beaten back, and Theseus subsequently leaves his warrior-paramour for the Greek maiden Phaedra, whom he marries. The spurned Amazon, hot with fury and not about to be outdone by her defiler/lover, crashes the nuptial feast with intent to avenge herself on Theseus, but is herself killed by Herakles, a guest at the wedding. This story, however, following
the Persian invasion of Greece during the Persian Wars, came to be viewed as unsavory: since
the Amazons, who came to be identified with the Persians, invaded Athens out of an honorable
impulse, Theseus’s rape of the Amazon woman seemed allegorically to put the cause of the
Persian invasion squarely on Athenian shoulders. Thus it was altered: the rape done away with,
the Amazon invasion of Athens was changed so that it was the Amazons themselves, drunk with
imperial aspirations and devoid of any legal claim, who attacked Athens of their own volition,
corresponding with the popular image of the hated, defeated Persian enemy.10 This highly
politicized tale came to be the chief motif of Amazonian representation in Greek art, for “the
defeat of the Amazons was praised as the rescue of all Greeks from slavery at the hands of
foreign conquerors [Persia]. Theseus and the rape of the Amazon were forgotten, and the exploit
turned into one belonging to all Athenians.”11

This evolving conception of the myth of Amazons as political (rather than sexual) others
came to be widely represented on Athenian monuments in the middle part of the century. This
was not unusual: though representations of recent history are largely missing from Greek public
art, myths and historical events of the dim past seemed to serve as proper allegories. As a result
fifth-century images of battles against Amazons and centaurs were ubiquitous, both on public
monuments and buildings, as well as on vases, representing symbolically the recent battles
against the Persian threat.12

Among the Athenian structures depicting battles against the Amazons, or
Amazonomachies, was the Theseum, a monument built to Theseus in Athens in the mid 470s
B.C. The building showcased artfully-rendered scenes of a number of his exploits, including his

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10 Ibid, 2-3, 4, 15, 16.
12 Hardwick, 30; Stewart, 578; Tarbell, 226-227.
aforementioned struggles against the Amazons. The Stoa Poikile (Painted Porch) built around 469, featured a number of paintings of famous and mythical Athenian (and Greek) victories, including the defeat of the Persians at Eurymedon, “Athenians confronting Lacedaemonians [Spartans] at Oine, Amazons before the Acropolis, Persians and Greeks at Marathon, and the capture of Troy.” Amazons were also represented on what has perhaps become the most famous example of Greek architecture, the Parthenon, on which a battle between Greeks and Amazons was featured on its west face; Amazons were also depicted in relief on the shield of the gigantic statue of Athena within the building.

However, this artistic association between Amazons and Persians, with the former said to represent the latter – and, indeed, the Athenian conceptions of the other themselves – are not wholly cut and dried. Hardwick has noted that research on Athenian views about themselves and their others is not yet complete and, while I do not consider the association between Amazons and Persians to be incorrect or misguided at all (indeed, it stands to reason that the Athenians would wish to remind themselves of their great victory against their eastern enemy) – I believe that another interpretation may be possible.

While some, like Anton Powell, have seen fit to abstract the meaning of the Amazonomachies represented on monumental artwork, stating that it really “reflect[s] the origin of civilization, protected from the threat of overwhelming barbarism”, I feel that a further, or alternate, specificity in the reading of these representations is important when considering

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13 Tyrrell, 10.
14 Ibid, 11.
16 Hardwick, 32.
17 Powell, 68.
Athenian conceptions of the other. I argue that another Athenian enemy could have been represented by the Amazonian other in public art: the increasingly dangerous Spartans.

Before we delve into those waters, however, it is useful to determine how the Amazon iconography aided in allegorizing themselves as Persians. Indeed, on close examination it is by no means an intellectual stretch that the Amazons, a feminine but powerful other, a crossroads figure, stood for the Persian menace. While the Amazons represented the very reverse of Athenian male society, as well as a challenge to it, the Persians were also conceived of as the opposite of Athenian political norms, possessing “weakness, softness, cowardice, inefficiency in battle, tolerance of enslavement, reluctance to endure any form of discipline, and sexual license…”\(^\text{18}\) While a corresponding military competency, such as that possessed by the Amazons, is not among these dubious qualities, it can be argued that the *totality* of perceived differences in both Amazons and Persians helped to transpose the identity of one onto the other. However, the Persians were not without their militaristic identifiers. Amazons were commonly shown, following the Persian Wars, dressed not only in Persian clothes, but carrying the iconic Persian archery kit – bows and arrows being, as noted in the last chapter, a weapon considered distinctly un-Athenian. As well, the othered cultural inferiority of the Persians did not seem to extend too far into the military realm: just as a defeated Amazon was viewed not as something inferior, but as a prize to be bragged about, so too it was with Athenian enemies in general, and, consequently, with the Persians; for, if an enemy was weak, beating him was no challenge, and did not bestow glory onto the vanquisher:\(^\text{19}\) “there was little heroic reputation to be gained in setting out to defeat the ‘womanish’ and ‘feeble’.”\(^\text{20}\) Furthermore, the Persians themselves


\(^{19}\) Cohen, 699, 702, 714; Hardwick, 32.

\(^{20}\) Hardwick, 32.
favored an oligarchic government, in which political power was wielded by the propertied classes of society, as opposed to democracy, in which political power was in the hands of citizens. 21 Thus, the Athenians had good cause to use the Amazons iconographically to represent their Persian foes. But what possibility was there that these Greeks would conceive of Sparta as such an other?

While the Athenians brought about democracy as their dominant form of government during the fifth century and sought out equality, possessed a mighty fleet patrolling the Mediterranean from Italy to Turkey, and stationed troops throughout mainland Greece, Sparta was a different story.22 Thomas Cahill, in a single sentence, sardonically – but without much hyperbole – encapsulates the Spartan lifestyle: “Landlocked Sparta, not many miles south on the Peloponnese, ruled by its gerousia, or council of old men, was an airless, artless nightmare of xenophobic preparedness, the North Korea of its day.”23

Sparta ruled the Peloponnesus (the southernmost region of Greece) beginning in the 650s B.C. Elders were given great deference in Sparta, and politically the polis was ruled through its council of elders, which moderated between the power of Sparta’s kings and the citizens’ assembly in an effort to lessen the possibility of both autocracy and practical democracy. Spartan society was supposedly shaped by Lycurgus, a dubious legendary lawgiver. As such, the state sought to rid itself and its subjects of wealth, aiming to force all citizens into a single standard of simple living,24 to “train men in frugality and thrift….”25 (Nevertheless, it was the oligarchs, the

To this end, each Spartan citizen was issued ownership of one of nine thousand plots of land, divided equally, and able to produce enough food for a man and his wife to live on. Spartan currency was deliberately devalued, consisting of (literally) worthless iron bars, too heavy to carry in any quantity, and commercially useless. This currency was not accepted in any other Greek polis, and all foreign commerce was forbidden by law; necessary items were to be made in Sparta itself, producing a self-sufficient state.

However, complicating this idea was the fact that trades were forbidden in Sparta, and no Spartan held a job. Who, then, was to supply the daily necessities of life? Enter the helots, the debased slave class of Sparta. Outnumbering their masters by a factor of seven to one, the helots kept daily life in Sparta running, but fear of the violent possibilities of such a high concentration of slaves converted Sparta into a highly militarized society. Controlling the largest contiguous territory of any Greek city-state, Spartans themselves became highly insular and xenophobic, seeking to keep control of their land at any price, including outright state-sponsored murder of the helots by Spartan agents.

Spartan citizens fared little better, enduring state-imposed dietary restrictions, forced exercise, marriage regulations that kept men and women sequestered, and governmental eugenics policies: children were viewed as property of the state and thus spouse-swapping to ensure strong genetic lines was encouraged. Infants, upon their birth, were inspected by the governing council;

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25 Plutarch, 19.


27 Plutarch, 16, 17.

28 Cahill, 117; Hornblower, *Greek World*, 99, 101; Plutarch, 17, 33, 36-37; Powell, 97, 252-254; Stadter, 3.
unfit specimens were left in the wilderness to die.\textsuperscript{29} Politically, Sparta’s oligarchy included a dual kingship, with the monarchs claiming descent from that purest of Spartan heroes, Herakles.\textsuperscript{30}

Despite sharing a common geographic region, both Athens and Sparta couldn’t have been more different: as noted, Athens favored democracy and permitted the free-flow of differing opinions, while Sparta’s oligarchic society allowed nothing of the kind:\textsuperscript{31} indeed, “the democratic notion of freedom…was set in opposition to the rigid, repressive social and political system of Sparta, to tyranny, and to oligarchy.”\textsuperscript{32} The Spartans favored a strict simplicity and savage regularity that conflicted greatly with Athenian social and political ideals.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, the political differences between the two were emphasized by Thucydides in his \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}. The author, himself an Athenian, favorably contrasted the richness and comfort of the Athenian lifestyle with the starkness of the Spartan. His arguments in favor of Athens seemed to imbue the polis with an inherent social virtue: since earliest times, Thucydides stated, Athenians had always been a cohesive people, politically and racially stable, tacitly pitting them against their fearful, guarded Peloponnesian neighbors. Even Athenian and Spartan war making methods were viewed dichotomously by Thucydides, who stated that Spartan supremacy lay in its infantry, while Athens’ fleet ruled the waves.\textsuperscript{34} Such stark differences

\textsuperscript{29} Cahill, 117; Plutarch, 17-18, 22, 23, 24, 26-28, 33; Stadter, 3; Thucydides, I.46.

\textsuperscript{30} Hornblower, \textit{Greek World}, 99, 100; Plutarch, 3, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16; Powell, 102.

\textsuperscript{31} Geddes, 327; Raaflaub, “Father,” 322.

\textsuperscript{32} Raaflaub, “Father,” 322.

\textsuperscript{33} Braund, 47.

\textsuperscript{34} Thucydides, I.1, 2, 6; 82.
between rivals would also influence the Americans of the late 1940s and 1950s when they formulated the Soviet Union as an othered menace.

Even Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ Funeral Oration bear this dichotomy out when Pericles states that Spartan military education was not a strength but a liability: “there is great difference,” he says, “between us and our opponents…. The Spartans, from their earliest boyhood, are submitted to the most laborious training in courage; we pass our lives without these restrictions, and yet are just as ready to face the same dangers as they are.”\(^\text{35}\) Just as earlier differences between Greeks and Amazons were conceived of as ideological and not physical threats, so too are the conceptual differences between Athens and Sparta. It is Sparta’s adherence to a diametrically opposed political system that sets Spartans off as different and makes them a threat; even talk of Sparta’s military might is tempered by conceptions of Spartan culture. However, such political differences were not the only factors keeping the two apart.

The ancient Greeks also believed that two distinct ethnic groups made up the entire Hellenic polity: Dorians (associated with the Spartans) and Ionians (associated with the Athens), with each member viewed as being intrinsically linked, however tenuously, to the whole of their particular faction. Memories persisted of a long-ago time when the Dorians, claiming descent from Herakles, swept into Greece as a mighty invasion force, scattering the Ionians to Attica and Asia Minor. This rivalry continued into the fifth century’s Peloponnesian conflict: \(^\text{36}\) “this warfare between the Spartan alliance, mainly composed of Dorian Greeks, and the Delian League, consisting chiefly of Ionians, must have strengthened the feeling that there was a natural opposition between the two linguistic and cultural groups.”\(^\text{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Ibid, II.39.

While these concerns centered largely on the Spartans as an outside threat to Athenian political stability and cultural esteem, problems within the political culture of Athens began to fester as well, localized in the form of the Laconizers (just as Communist spies within the U.S. – real or perceived, were feared in Cold War America). Named for Laconia, the southern region of the Peloponnesus in which Sparta sat, Laconizers were those Athenians who openly favored the Spartan socio-political system and wished to impose it on their polis – for, by the 430s, the ideologies of democracy and oligarchy had fully split ways. Most Laconizers can be identified as belonging to the moneyed elite of Athens, who felt that democracy cheated the “best” members of society out of their wonted voice and control in politics.38 “Democracy, the critics said, was the rule of the poor, base, uneducated, incapable, and irresponsible masses for their own interest.”39 With such views, the Spartan system, emphasizing respect to elders and rule by councilors, was no doubt very appealing to the rich, who saw themselves as being pushed to the wayside by democracy. However, supporting Sparta ideologically was not enough for these individuals, who, as symbols of their commitment, began to adopt Spartan mannerisms, such as wearing Spartan cloaks and growing their hair long in the Peloponnesian manner.40 Indeed, there was a veritable cornucopia of stereotyped signifiers and affectations that a Laconizer might adopt to show his allegiance:

[An individual] the Athenian termed a Laconizer was an avowed admirer of Spartiate prescriptive oligarchy, sacred in many respects, as opposed to Athenian principal democracy, with its numerous secular features…. As emblematic of his

37 Powell, 44.
40 Braund, 47.
admiration, he displayed his hair at shoulder length…, fingered a moustacheless beard, boxed at least enough to acquire a cauliflower ear or a thickened nose, pranced along in red shoes, draped himself in a scarlet cloak, sported a cane with an appropriately elegant curve, ostentatiously consumed black broth…, led on a leash a Spartan fox-hound, and affected choppy conversation sprinkled with Doric words – which is to say, talked Laconically.

Usually meeting in clubs, male Laconizers were widely-known to be invested in cracking the foundations of Athenian democracy, and also openly engaged in what was considered deviant sexual activity, including dressing their wives as youths and indulging explicitly in homosexuality (which, while far from unknown among upstanding Athenians, would have attached a certain stigma to the Laconizer). The activities of Laconizers were not limited to dandified sartorial exhibitions and rhetorical tirades against democracy, however: in 415, they were accused of attempting to stop the deployment of the Athenian fleet to Syracuse, and five years later Laconizers made an effort to sign a peace agreement with Sparta which, if concluded, would allow them leadership at Athens.

It can be seen, then, that Athens had good reason to consider the Spartans an othered enemy, a force ideologically opposed to them which sought their ruin: Sparta was oligarchic in government and rigid in its control of its populace, whereas Athens was ideologically democratic and in favor of freedom for its populace; Sparta’s military was based on infantry, Athens’ on the sea; Spartans were members of the supposedly mighty Dorian ethnic group, whereas Athenians were Ionians, the Dorians’ natural enemies; furthermore, those Athenians who supported Spartan

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41 It should be noted that violent exercise of this kind was considered to be an aristocratic pastime, and therefore representative of oligarchy. See Hornblower, *Greek World*, 21.

42 Becker, 491-492.

43 Ibid, 492.

ideology did so in manners which distanced them culturally from the Athenian norm, and openly sought the downfall of the Athenian polis. Despite these differences, the question still stands: could the Athenians have recognized the Amazons in public art as representations of the Spartans as well as the Persians?

Such an interpretation does not seem to be a stretch, as certain pieces of circumstantial and iconographic evidence support this idea. First, the Parthenon, which included two depictions of Amazons in its public artworks, was built in the 440s B.C., following the Peace of Kallias, a treaty which effectively ended hostilities between Greece and Persia. With relations between the two powers beginning to thaw, the urgency of eternally considering the Persians a credible threat to Athenian security would have dissipated, creating the possibility that the familiar Amazon iconography was opened up for new interpretations. Furthermore, the depictions of Amazons in Athenian artwork, Stewart argues, resemble the stereotyped bodies of Spartan women: “Not truly feminine…. they were not properly masculine…either. Adolescent girls with this physique were to be found on the splendid bronze mirrors of sixth-century Sparta…”

As well, parallels can be drawn among how the Spartans, Amazons and Persians were understood in the Greek mind. While the Amazons themselves represented matriarchy, the “dark side” of Greek life, in their use as proxies for Persians – the Amazons’ former connection to an othered political system – opened the way for them to become representatives of oligarchy, which was also the Spartan governmental paradigm. Also, Spartans and Amazons were well-known for their military power, with the Amazons considered worthy adversaries, an apt representation for the warlike Spartans.

46 Powell, 49, 50, 63.
47 Stewart, 579.
Next, the Spartans represented the Dorian ethnicity, distinct and opposed to the Ionian ethnicity of Athens, while the Amazons, in their guise as Persians, represented their Eastern ethnicity, opening up the way for a new interpretation. And even more telling is the fact that Amazons wielded bows and arrows. Certainly, as mentioned earlier and in the previous chapter, archery was determined to be a decidedly un-Greek war-discipline, utilized by Persians and thus transposed onto their Amazonian alter-egos. However, with relations between Greece and Persia improving, the bow and arrow could have taken on a different association: as seen in the last chapter, archery was a favored pastime of Herakles, a hero of the Spartans and the legendary progenitor of their Dorian ancestors. In the hands of an Amazonian other sporting decreasing ties to Persia, the bow and arrow may have iconically linked the Amazons of myth to the Spartans of reality.

This connection becomes even more plausible when we consider that, despite their military might, the true fear that Sparta extorted from Athens was ideological, not physical – as was the threat of the Amazons. Laconizers in Athens did not seek to kill Athenians but to convert them, and put themselves in power. The other was an Athenian construct not of visceral fear for their lives, but of fear for their lifestyle. Athenians, Raaflaub notes, were constantly primed “to protect the freedom of the community both internally and externally….“48

Thus the Amazon, a continually evolving and rather chimerical figure in Greek mythology, a true representative of what it means to be a breed apart from the Greek ways of the world, came, in the hands of Athenians, to represent not only the memory of an attacking Persian army, but the reality of the coming Spartan other, a real other whose political, cultural, ethnic and ideological differences set them far outside the realm of Athenian acceptability. Just as the Amazons represented a matriarchal force gone wrong, threatening the very foundations of

Athenians’ conceptualization of themselves, the Spartans, too, were believed to be not so much a force of physical violence but, through their exterior and interior prevalence in Athenian life, a factor that, if unchecked, could destroy the treasured beliefs of the Athenians. Could such a detailed vision of the other be found in the guise of the comic book aliens of the American postwar world?

The fear of a Communist threat was not a new concept in Cold War American society.\(^{49}\) A Red Scare, beginning in 1919 and inflamed by fears of Bolshevik revolutionary activity in the states, came to full flower through private and government action, as well as immigration laws blocking entrance of those considered the most radical, until the mid-1920s.\(^{50}\) This anticommmunist feeling began to slacken in the Depression and, as noted, later amicable relations between the two powers allowed their alliance during World War II. However, with the increase of Soviet ambitions in Europe and the east, domestic fears about homegrown Communists sprouted at home.\(^{51}\)

Such suspicions about the Russians, and Communists in general, had in fact been brewing since the dawning moments of the postwar period, and soon loyalty oaths for

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\(^{49}\) This second part of the chapter appeared, in somewhat altered form, as the seminar paper “Ray Guns Over America: Anticommunism, Propaganda, and EC Comics,” in the Spring Semester of 2005.


government employees, as well as FBI investigations, came into vogue. But even these measures were small in comparison to the March 12, 1947 Truman Doctrine speech, which decried Soviet adventurism in Greece and Turkey, and laid out measures to stem the tide. Soon, all domestic Communists were viewed by the general public as unquestionably loyal to Stalin, and the society-at-large braced for an inevitable clash of powers. The rise of Wisconsin Republican senator Joseph McCarthy and his accusations that Communists were present within the U.S. government existed. This announcement was just one of McCarthy’s many salvos in a “series of sensational charges to the effect that Communism was on the march as a result of treason within the upper reaches of the U.S. government,” and HUAC and other committees investigating Communism and Communist influences began to follow suit. America, the thinking ran, needed to be on a war footing to check the Soviets ensuring that the American people stood behind their country’s increased involvement overseas, and that programs with even the hint of radicalism were stamped out for safety sake. By 1950, anticommunism was a standard ideological stance for John and Jane Q. Public. Americans, it


54 Wang, 128.

55 Hixson, 52.

56 Wang, 271, 272.


seems, had accepted the Communist threat as real, and understanding why is not difficult. By investigating and trying Communists, the government criminalized the ideology and its adherents in the public eye, and Americans came to equate Communists with Soviet spies who sought to undermine the American way of life—others who, existing outside the law and fostering an othered ideology. And, not unexpectedly, those who had had the least experience with actual Communists feared Communism the most. ⁵⁹

The most interesting facet of this anti-Communism, which connects us to the earlier discussion of Amazons and Spartans, is that while there were fears of violent Communist overthrow in America, and of Soviet use of the atom bomb, the fears were not, at their heart, concerns about personal safety. It was not the death of an American, or all Americans, which mattered so much, but the aftermath: the Communist takeover of American ideals. The struggle between ideologies is meant to produce one outcome: the victory of one ideology over another, not a nuclear wasteland. Espionage and atomic war were merely means to that particular end.

Among the cultural products reacting to this Cold War zeitgeist was the comic book. Comics now began to express a political consciousness previously unseen in the medium, as comic book writers and artists tailored stories to help in explaining the events of the world to their readers, just as the Amazon myth altered with the needs of the Athenian people. As well, the face of comics was changing with the times. While the World War II era featured a variety of superheroes fighting the Axis powers, few of these characters actually survived to witness the icy advance of the Cold War. Thus, with the specter of the atom bomb looming large in the American psyche, superheroes were no longer the order of the day, and the new trends of romance- and anticommunism-themed comics ruled the newsstands. ⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Hixson, xiv; Schrecker, 20, 21, 27.
The choice of the Soviets as comic book villains was a simple one: with Nazi villains a thing of the past, Communists seemed a ready-made enemy to fill the vacuum. Stories involving Communist villains could not only give readers a primer on the issues of the day, but also help increase the profile of comic books as a medium that truly supported American ideals. That said, however, comic book interpretations of the Cold War were not hallmarks of accuracy: the role of hero and villain, white hat and black hat, were eternally filled with Americans and Communists respectively, creating a gloss of Cold War dynamics which at once clarified the storytelling and appealed to the populace-at-large. Comics fostered the unerring belief that the American spies featured in their pages, physically and intellectually superior to their Slavic enemies, would always triumph, using brutal methods in their prosecution of American Cold War security to stem larger problems in the long run.\textsuperscript{61}

One comics publisher flourishing during this trend – and which seemed to buck it – was EC (or “Entertainment”) Comics. Originally begun by the father of the comic book medium, Max Gaines, EC or “Educational Comics” at first specialized in Biblical, historical and funny animal comic books for children. With Gaines’ death in 1947, however, the reins passed to Bill, his 25-year-old son. Switching the company’s focus to teenagers and adults, Gaines began to publish such legendary horror titles as \textit{Tales from the Crypt} and changed EC’s acronym from “Educational” to “Entertainment Comics.”\textsuperscript{62} Plotting every story of every EC comic along with artist and writer Al Feldstein – a monumental task – Gaines offered top dollar for artistic talent,

\textsuperscript{60} Savage Jr., 39, 43; Wright, 110, 111.

\textsuperscript{61} Savage Jr., 34-35, 37, 38, 39; Wright, 110, 111.

and certainly got what he paid for.\textsuperscript{63} Indeed, EC seemed to push the envelope in every facet of the field. As comic book-scholar Bradford Wright remarked, “during the first half of the 1950s, EC produced remarkably innovative and distinctive comic books that challenged the creative standards of the industry, [and] attacked the façade of America’s Cold War consensus…”\textsuperscript{64}

Among the EC comics at the forefront of this new wave were \textit{Weird Science} and \textit{Weird Fantasy}, the brainchildren of EC bullpen artists Harry Harrison and Wally Wood, created in 1950. These titles were a far cry from the sword-and-ray-gun science fiction produced in earlier days.\textsuperscript{65} Gaines, a self-described “extreme liberal,”\textsuperscript{66} used the advantage granted him by the science fiction medium and his older readership “to make statements about such 1950s issues as nuclear disarmament, racial prejudice, and male-female relationships.”\textsuperscript{67} These stories, aimed at imparting what Gaines termed “a moral or ethical lesson,”\textsuperscript{68} also concluded with a distinctive – and usually harrowing – O. Henry-style ending.\textsuperscript{69}

Unusually progressive for their day in terms of subject matter, EC tackled such diverse topics as sex changes, interracial marriage, and social prejudice, all in an allegorical, science fiction setting. One particularly controversial story was “He Walks Among Us,” which suggested that Christ may have been an alien equipped with technologically-advanced powers.\textsuperscript{70} Such

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{63}] Mike Benton, \textit{Science Fiction Comics: The Illustrated History} (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1992), 37, 45; Wright, 136.
\item[\textsuperscript{64}] Wright, 135.
\item[\textsuperscript{65}] Benton, 36-37.
\item[\textsuperscript{66}] Wright, 138.
\item[\textsuperscript{67}] Benton, 38.
\item[\textsuperscript{68}] \textit{Ibid.}, 38.
\item[\textsuperscript{69}] \textit{Ibid.}
\item[\textsuperscript{70}] \textit{Ibid}, 40, 42-44.
\end{itemize}
stories were, as Mike Benton explains, “EC’s own way of provoking the reader to think and question even the most fundamental beliefs.”

Despite such thematic and political innovations – or, perhaps, because of them – the popularity and sales of the EC science fiction titles began to drop off in 1952, and in 1954 they were consolidated into a single offering, *Weird Science-Fantasy*. Eventually renamed *Incredible Science Fiction* due to the stringent Comics Code guidelines, the comic was eventually cancelled by Gaines in 1956 after his frustrations with Comics Code micromanaging of its content.

Science fiction comics such as *Weird Science* seem to be an enigma in the trends of the postwar comics medium. Progressive in thematic content and tone, they look to be a far cry from the spy-laden, anticommunist content comic book scholars Savage Jr. and Wright describe, and even antithetical to it. It is interesting that, in terms of anticommunist content in science fiction comics, the analysis only recognizes that these comics seem to reflect the same kinds of anticommunism found in science fiction *films* of the era. However, the focus of this chapter is not to dispel the foregoing image of EC science fiction comics in present scholarship (although such an analysis is not unwarranted) but to understand how these comic books imagined the other, in this case the Communist menace, in postwar American society. It will be seen that these comics provide an important and interesting way of viewing the Soviet enemy in the postwar world: less a physical threat to Americans, its real danger is the potential damage to the hearts, minds, and mentalities of “right-thinking” citizens.

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72 Benton, 50, 51.

73 Savage Jr., 34-35, 37, 38, 39; Wright, 110, 111

74 Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 1, 2.
Culturally, science fiction’s veiled treatments of anticommunism has been viewed as rather third-rate and sophomoric, due to popular lack of respect for the genre, and it is quite easy to dismiss such media representations of Communism as merely Cold War “anxiety” or “paranoia”\(^\text{75}\) and leave any potential political meaning they might hold at the water’s edge.\(^\text{76}\) Such dismissive treatment of this content is exemplified by Savage Jr., who flippantly states that “The Thing from Another World (1951) and Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) were prominent examples of Hollywood anti-Communism in the alien-invasion, we’ll-all-be-zombies mode.”\(^\text{77}\)

This analytical vacuum also applies to comics.\(^\text{78}\) As will be shown, the EC science fiction titles did indeed include stories which featured propagandistic themes of anticommunism, especially in warning against complacency in dealing with fears of espionage, and exhorting trust in government and American institutions. This, in the end, is the real thrust of such storytelling: these tales seek to teach the reader not to curtail enemies coming from without but, truly, ideological and emotional enemies from \textit{within themselves}.

1950s science fiction in general had no qualms about creating metaphorical tales representing the Cold War.\(^\text{79}\) Space aliens became the narrative equivalent of Soviet Communists, and this equivocation came with its own set of standard features. Savage Jr. describes these as

\(^{75}\) Hendershot, \textit{Paranoia}, 1.

\(^{76}\) \textit{Ibid}, 1, 2.

\(^{77}\) Savage Jr., 37.

\(^{78}\) The EC science fiction comics are not alone in this praise. For similar discussions of EC’s horror and crime titles see Diehl, 28-52, and Wright, 135-153,

\(^{79}\) Savage Jr., 37.
allegorical treatments from the genre of science fiction (or maybe horror) wherein aliens from Mars or elsewhere were employed to represent the Red Menace. Cold, calculating, and utterly incapable of emotion (thus conforming nicely to popular ideas of what godless Commies were all about), these creatures were doubly dangerous: not only did they argue for a mindless communalism too horrible to contemplate, they also were either (1) extremely difficult to kill with conventional weapons or (2) extremely difficult to sort out of the general population, given their remarkable ability to look just like us.\textsuperscript{80}

This sort of description fit well with the prevailing political and social picture painted of Communists in America. Truman and others saw the American struggle against Communism through a Manichean, black-and-white lens, exhibited not only in government policy but also in Voice of America propaganda. In this stance, the Soviets became, or represented, the cruel dopplegängers of Americans – where the Americans were good, the Soviets were bad. For science fiction, it was only a small creative step to take this kind of dichotomy and transpose it into symbolism more useful to the medium; in other words, America’s Soviet (and thus un-American) foe was placed in the mold of the ultimate other – the space alien.\textsuperscript{81} This paradigm of othering – American vs. Soviet/Human vs. Inhuman Alien – became, as we shall see, a staple of how EC comics dealt with anticommunism.

One of the more common anticommunist themes found in the EC science fiction comics was the imminent threat of espionage and sabotage on the part of Soviet agents, re-imagined on the comics pages as aliens. Fear of such actions, carried out by fifth-columnists within the government, already permeated American culture. It was already feared, for instance, that Soviet-allied Communists had Roosevelt’s ear during the 1945 Yalta conference, and influenced the president to allow Stalin to take Poland. Others feared that similar agents in the government had allowed China to fall to the Maoists. While this may seem to be a form of sour grapes,

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{81} Hixson, 42; Lucas, 11; Savage, Jr., 37; Stein, 480, 484, 492.
misplaced aggression, or partisan political strategy (‘America could have prevailed, if it wasn’t for those meddling Commies!’), there were other indicators closer to home suggesting to the American public that Communist spies were right next door, just as the Athenians feared the possible actions of domestic Laconizers.\textsuperscript{82}

The period of the late 1940s through 1950s was a tense time for national security. State Department employee Alger Hiss was accused of espionage by admitted Communist Whittaker Chambers during a HUAC hearing in 1948, and later convicted. Another case involved Elizabeth ‘Red Spy Queen’ Bentley, who admitted working for Soviet spies in Washington, D.C., at the behest of her lover. And, perhaps most famous of all, in the summer of 1950 a series of unraveling spy rings led to the discovery of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg’s complacency in relaying American atomic secrets to the Soviets. They would be convicted of this crime and subsequently executed in 1953. Spies, far from the lofty halls of global politicking, seemed to have settled down in nearby neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{83} But what was the fear underlying American culture that made the quashing of Communist activity so urgent? A look at some of the comic books of the day will aid us in our understanding.

Gaines and Feldstein, who penned EC Comics’ science fiction tales, obviously found meaning in events as those described above. One story, “‘Things’ From Outer Space,” appearing in the May-June 1950 issue of \textit{Weird Science}, openly addresses fears of espionage. In the tale Dr. Lane, and his assistant, Janet Parker, after examining a strange crater, drive to a nearby farmhouse. There the pair encounter a man who reveals his identity as a member of a three-eyed alien race (the third eye is concealed in the folds of his brow) slowly colonizing earth. The man subsequently attempts to kill them. Janet escapes, and takes her story to assorted government

\textsuperscript{82} Schrecker, 21, 22, 23.

\textsuperscript{83} Heale, 146-147, 148; Schrecker, 33; Wang, 262.
officials, all of whom find her claims incredible. Eventually, a Pentagon official directs her to the Secretary of Defense, who pronounces her insane on the spot and has her taken away. In the final panel, however, the Secretary of Defense and his aides turn to look at one another, revealing the third eyes in each of their foreheads.\(^8\) This story is a near-perfect translation to the comics page of prevailing fears of Soviet infiltrators, symbolized by the three-eyed aliens, gaining high access to government posts discussed above.

What is important in looking at this story is that the actual substance of the alien threat is left nebulous. The first alien attempts to kill Dr. Lane and Janet, and admits that he and his comrades are slowly colonizing earth, but what are we to make of their purpose? It is not a violent one, but soft and smoothly insidious, unnoticeable, the kind of plot one would also associate with Athenian Laconizers or an Amazonian matriarchy. These aliens, like those older enemies, do not pose a direct physical threat but, as their infiltration of government shows, an ideological one. However, despite being dragged off to indefinite confinement, it should be noted that Janet is not entirely defeated. Though the weight of the government not only fails her but, ultimately, falls on her, it is Janet’s persistence that recommends her as a tragic hero: she doesn’t take no for an answer, and goes straight to the top with her complaint. She is not complacent, but confident in what she has seen and in what needs to be done. She has not given into the other. These two facets are the hallmark of the stories that will be discussed below.

Another story representative of this theme is “The Slave of Evil,” which originally appeared in 1951: A man awakens in a laboratory, attended by two scientists with suspiciously foreign names (Dr. Felix Vanderchef and Dr. Victor Belzky). Apparently an amnesiac, the man is informed that his name is Peter, and upon leaving the lab finds himself compelled to kill an

electrical engineer named Berghoff and steal a set of his blueprints. Returning, Peter meets another man, also awakening, named Rudy, who suffers from similar memory problems. At the behest of the doctors, the pair robs a bank, and Rudy is shot. Peter, returning to the doctors, overhears them speaking of plans for world domination using robots, and realizes that he himself is a robot controlled by an electric brain made by Berghoff, the murdered electrical engineer, and operated by the doctors. Killing the doctors, Peter sets a bomb at the electronic brain and sits by it, awaiting death. The American belief that “individual Communists, acting as subversives, spies, and saboteurs, could threaten American security” seems to have been taken whole cloth by Feldstein and Gaines, as they recounted this tale of a literally mindless dupe performing acts of terrorism. Here, again, Peter is a hero in a vein similar to Janet in the previous tale. Though created and used by allegorical Communists for their own ends, Peter sees the light and realizes that complacency is not a worthy path, and rebels against the restraints imposed on him. He takes action by killing the conspirators, and symbolically purifies himself of his crimes by sacrificing himself for a just cause.

Other stories also work on variations of this infiltration theme. “Panic” begins in 1939 as a radio broadcast of a fake Martian invasion causes panic in the streets of New York, and the broadcaster is mortified. Years later, however, with science fiction now popular, a new Martian broadcast is made with plenty of advance warning to the populace. Thus, on Sunday, November 19, 1950, at 9 p.m. the broadcast goes on. However, the invasion being broadcast is real, as is the

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86 Schrecker, 22.
radio report, but the populace, lulled into security by advance advertising, is caught unawares. Mankind, as a result, is enslaved, and eventually ceases to exist under alien hegemony.\textsuperscript{87}

Another such tale is “Down to Earth.” The year is 1993 and, after a large number of violent plane crashes, humanity abandons air travel as too unsafe. A rogue scientist, however, blames the crashes on a conspiracy of aliens attempting to thwart mankind’s aeronautical advances to the stars. In the end, the professor discovers that he is, indeed, correct, when a group of aliens come for him and kill him on the spot.\textsuperscript{88}

These two stories provide us with a valuable lens to better understand the didactic messages present in these comics. All deal with alien (and therefore Soviet) invasions of/incursions into America in which the public or individuals are taken by surprise. Both tales, at their heart, thus deal with \textit{complacency}. The complacency of American society in the face of Soviet Communism was something admonished by James P. Warburg in his rather alarming 1954 essay; indeed, as Warburg described, it was a trait of American society which had already wreaked havoc and made us weak in the face of our Soviet enemies: He asserts that

\begin{quote}
The same complacency which caused us prematurely to dismantle our great military power caused us to be lax in guarding our internal security, although common sense should have warned us that our sole possession of the atomic secret would attract spies as a magnet attracts steel filings.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

To Warburg, America’s loss of its monopoly on the Bomb was brought about by a society that little understood the dangers of the postwar world. “Panic” reflects such sentiments clearly. The public listening to the Martian invasion broadcast, having earlier been told that there was nothing


\textsuperscript{89} James P. Warburg, “Cold War Tragedy,” \textit{The Western Political Quarterly} 7, no. 31 (September, 1954): 330.
to worry about, that it was only a broadcast, was, like Warburg’s American people, lulled into a false sense of security.\textsuperscript{90} Even when the radio announcer pleads for audience members to take action, they remain in their seats:

Announcer: …The Army has refused to send troops! They think the reports are false! This is not the Walls broadcast! We repeat…this is not the Walls broadcast…”

Listener 1: “Haw, haw!”

Listener 2: “Pretty clever!”\textsuperscript{91}

It is similar with the professor in “Down to Earth”:

Professor: “A world that has abandoned aviation! We have given up the rocket tests, discarded the jet-developments, stopped flying…in fear! Fear of Death! But, sometimes, gentleman, one cannot see the forest for the trees! …These creatures…these extra-terrestrial visitors in the disc-shaped craft…have driven earthmen from the skies! Coldly… Calculatingly… Forced us to give up flight! Why? Because we were getting too close! Because space travel was almost a reality! They didn’t want that! They wanted us to stop!”\textsuperscript{92}

Humanity, the professor argues, has committed the sin of complacency in giving up flight: they have given it up unquestioningly, out of fear and personal self-interest, out of the fear of dying in a crashing plane, rather than acting for the betterment of mankind and continuing to research and advance the technology of flight. Humanity has, in essence, traitored itself and become an unwitting, but active, participant in the enemy’s schemes, and given into the alien/Soviet other and its demands.\textsuperscript{93} Such stories, engineered by Gaines and Feldstein, are calls to action. America

\textsuperscript{90} Feldstein, “Panic,” 1-8.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, 7.

\textsuperscript{92} Feldstein and Wood, “Down,” 7.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid, 1-8.
will be infiltrated and run by aliens/Soviets, they say, and America will suffer, unless the threat is recognized for what it is, unless the Soviets and their agents are seen for the enemies that they are. In this, they are tacitly lauding the actions of McCarthy and HUAC, and supporting the prevailing anticommunist status quo: McCarthy and HUAC have already recognized the Communist threat for what it is. It is thus up to the populace – they are responsible for their own safety.

Another tale, “The People’s Choice,” addresses a similar issue, that of taking the act of voting seriously. In “The People’s Choice,” a popular children’s show puppet, Allie Gator, “jokingly” throws his hat into the race for president. The public, underwhelmed by the mediocrity of the mainstream candidates, warms to the idea, and Allie becomes a protest write-in candidate. Eventually elected president, a hearing is conducted to determine how this happened, and it is discovered that Allie is a parasitic alien attached to the arm of his puppeteer, one of an entire species attempting to invade earth. Despite the hearings and an impeachment trial, Allie remains president, and the alligator-aliens, seeing the door open, invade, taking over American politics.94

This story, from the outset, has all of the trappings of the now familiar “aliens/commies will invade America” model, but with a decidedly sharper edge. The fear of Communist infiltration of government is strongly presented in this tale – here, the alien/Soviet agent actually attains the rank of president, and the entire American legislature is subsequently conquered95 -
but that is not the chief aim of Gaines’ and Feldstein’s story here. This story is promoting what
Gaines seems to see as a responsible attitude towards the American electoral process, that is,
vote *rationally*:

> Man Reading News: “Get this Sam! ‘Pollsters refuse to make a prediction about
  the coming election! Too many people interviewed are taking it too lightly!
  Everybody jokes about it! A sampling of opinion is impossible with this general
  feeling.’”  

Do not, Gaines seems to be saying, vote based on emotion or to protest the status quo – don’t, in
short, vote for the Communist Party. Here, as in the other stories, the alien/Soviet other has been
transformed into an idea. It is no longer a physical presence but a change of mind, of heart, of
ideology. The alien invasion is merely a by-product. In this tale, there is no violence, no threat of
some kind of world-ending disaster. Instead, the disaster is the end of the American political
system. The danger is in abandoning – in othering – the American political process for
something un-American and, therefore, destructive to American ideals. And the only way to stop
this inner dissention is for individual citizens to do so themselves.

The above discussions of Amazons/Spartans and Aliens/Communists as others in their
respective societies, when compared, yield interesting and similar statements about the societies
which originated those dualities. Both physical enemies, the Spartans and Soviet Communists,
represented, on the surface, physical threats due to their military might – Sparta with its strong
army, the Soviets with their possession of the bomb – as well as ideological threats, as their
political and societal structures represented factors anathema to Athenian and American society.
Both, as well, had a history of espionage or, at least, attempts to overthrow their opposite

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96 Ibid, 5.
numbers – the Spartans with their Laconizer partisans, the Soviets with their numerous spies, such as the Rosenbergs. These factors – physical might, ideological opposition, and local danger – combined to transform these two into the others of the respective societies pitted against them.

But what draws fifth century Athens and postwar America closer together is how these two others were represented, and in what ways. Both societies chose iconic images – in Athens, the mythical Amazons, whose legendary traits closely resembled those of Sparta as they had earlier resembled Persia’s; in America, the aliens of science fiction, whose physical, racial and geographical distinctiveness easily allowed them to be compared to the Soviets. Both of these others posed a physical threat – in the myths and comic book stories both enemies invaded and killed with impunity. However, the truly defining characteristic exhibited by these others is their ideological opposition to their opposite numbers. As discussed earlier, Stein notes that ideology is at the forefront of differences between a society and its other, but in the cases of these two others, it is something that appears to have been overlooked.

Aliens and Amazons themselves do indeed pose a physical threat in the stories, as did the Spartans and Soviets in real life. However, these stories show that the physical threat is only the gateway to ideological threat, a means to an end. Fifth-century Athenians and postwar Americans both chose to represent their enemies as others whose chief threat was political and cultural, a change to the current worldview, as opposed to physical. Ideas, not people, were to be killed by these others. In postwar America, as seen in EC comics, this idea was taken further, was evolved: it was the responsibility of the individual citizens to recognize these ideas and quash them, or they would be just as culpable for the destruction of society as those who brought it.
CHAPTER III
THEY CLYTEMNESTRA COMPLEX: WOMEN AS OBJECTS AND AGENTS OF POWER
IN MYTH AND COMICS

The foregoing chapters have already discussed two facets of the “Cold War Mentality”: patriotism, and how this patriotic (and protective) feeling is elucidated and replicated in myth and comics; and the Other, how the other is viewed, defined, and conceived of in anxious cultures that feel themselves to be under attack. These, however, are two of the more abstract considerations and facets of the Cold War Mentality, and seem, as well, to be the province of men and male society at-large. Almost wholly absent from the discussion thus far have been the ways in which women, both ancient Athenian and postwar American, were viewed in the context of these respective cultural anxieties.

As will be seen, there were standard – and similar – viewpoints in both fifth-century Athens and early postwar America regarding the place of the woman in society: put simply, she was under the aegis of the male and was seen as a largely domestic figure, tending to home, hearth, and household. However, these kinds of roles for women have been largely associated with a belief that women were weak and inherently lesser beings than their male counterparts, and could therefore be made into objects. However, as I pondered these circumstances, a question arose: why did men in both of these cultures’ exhibit obsessive compulsions to keep control over women?

Scholars have noted that in Athens of the fifth century, women were seen by men as bearers of potential social catastrophe – the myth of Pandora, which will be discussed below, is a prime example of that. As well, the thoroughly “domesticated” women of the 1950s were figured by some cultural commentators as the bringers of a feminized society, wherein men were made
weak and women were too exalted. This suggests an overarching view that women were not weak but, indeed, powerful.

This power suggests to me that, instead of women being viewed as necessarily detrimental to the man of fifth-century Athens and postwar America, as sources of a power which needed to be kept in check, women were objectified for a wholly different reason: their power was necessary for men to use in order to obtain their patriarchal position, a trope leading back to the matriarchal traditions of the ancient Near East.¹ Through possession of the female, then, males both in Athens and America legitimated their political and social positions through symbolic attainment of power, a necessity in a time of unfolding hardships in the face of an othered enemy. Such themes can be readily recognized both in the myths of fifth-century Athens (and throughout Greece) and in the comic books (specifically the EC horror comics) of postwar America.

When one defines objectification, one most often does so by returning to the word itself, as does Martha C. Nussbaum in her work on the subject: objectification is the condition whereby “a human being is regarded and/or treated as an object.”² Delving deeper, Nussbaum arrives at increasingly complex and more satisfying definitions, in which she describes objectification as the reduction of a human subject to one of their specific parts, features, or roles,³ “the treatment of persons not as ends in themselves, but as means or tools for the satisfaction of one’s own

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¹ This argument was inspired, in part, by pop-cultural critical analyses of female 1960s sit-com characters such as those made by Bret Watson in his tongue-in-cheek article, “Is ‘Mr. Ed’ P.C.? Neigh!” in Entertainment Weekly, no. 219 (April 22, 1994): 45.


³ Ibid.
Going further, and applying the definitions to the station of women in an objectifying relationship, Nussbaum quotes Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon’s analyses of *The Story of O*, noting that, in being made an object, “O’s energy or power, as a woman, as Woman, is absorbed.” In this sort of ideology, Nussbaum notes, “women become expensive possessions that mark one’s status in the world of men.” However, while women are most often seen as being objectified into a submissive categorization, Nussbaum is explicit when she notes that women with power are, for men in general, viewed as making better possessions.

Indeed, such powerful women exert a strong psychological hold on the male subconscious – at least in Freudian imagining. Representatives of the forgotten bliss of childhood, a veritable human ivory tower never to be obtained, what Freud defined as “narcissistic women” “attract men and are envied by them for having known how to safeguard their narcissism, their terrifying inaccessibility, their independence, their nonchalance, and their high-self esteem by repelling everything that might be capable of depreciating them.” Such women, according to Freud, are seen as the ultimate representation of womanhood.

These theories illuminate the views of ancient matriarchal societies, in which the worship of goddesses encompassed an appreciation, and understanding, of the goddess’ inherent qualities: “beauty, sexuality, and fertility… the source of all knowledge, wisdom, law, and other

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4 *Ibid*, 266.
5 *Ibid*, 270.
characteristics, all of which later were thought to emanate only from male gods (and from men).”\textsuperscript{11} Such goddesses and goddess-worship allowed societies to honor the feminine, and its power unabashedly.\textsuperscript{12}

The male interest in this female power is also recounted in mythological sources. Jane Caputi has noted that a number of myths tell of a male god’s attempt to supplant female goddesses,\textsuperscript{13} and, indeed, in myth often “the boy becomes the man/hero/god by slaying the representative of nature and origins – the monster/goddess, ‘the girl’.”\textsuperscript{14} Culturally, such representations and lusts for power make a sort of sense: the divine right of kings in early Near Eastern cultures originated not from male gods, but from goddesses represented by a high priestess. Once ordained, the king was temporarily installed as a ruler, and then often killed after one year as part of a fertility rite, following a ritual mating with the priestess, the goddess’s representative.\textsuperscript{15}

These foregoing cultural and psychological discussions point out the fact that women are, in western society, very often conceived of as powerful – indeed, as the original manifestations of power, a conception which reaches back to the early days of civilization. What is more interesting and useful to this discussion, however, is the fact that such power is consistently desired by the male, who sees in its attainment the fulfillment of a lost part of himself.


\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid}, 38.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}, 4.

\textsuperscript{15} For an excellent discussion of this process, see Merlin Stone, \textit{When God Was a Woman} (New York: Dorset Press, 1976), 129-152.
It is just these sorts of conceptions that seem to be at the very basis of Athenian conceptions of women and their societal place, elusive though they are. While Michael Shaw notes that the position of women of fourth-century Athens is fairly clear-cut as noted in laws of the period, “it is exceedingly difficult to assess the position held by women in fifth-century Athens.” Indeed, despite the rather unhappy conditions to which women were usually remanded (discussed below), it is noted that we are not in any real position to judge the actual reactions of these women to their wonted niche in society. Despite these caveats, the lot of women in Athens as conceived publicly can best be characterized by this quote from a contemporary Greek: “We have courtesans for pleasure, concubines to look after the day-to-day needs of the body, wives that we may breed legitimate children and have a trusty warden of what we have in the house.”

Greek men of the fifth century are often characterized as misogynists – woman-haters – a condition which, speculatively, has been blamed on a male cultural terror of the female and is figured as the originator of the ideologies of male dominance in that society. However, again, it is also written that Greek men found themselves uncontrollably attracted to the power of woman – and that these women, very often courtesans, or hetarai, occupied a special place in male Greek imagining, often subjects of literature and art. Such reactions may not be so different from those exhibited by men of postwar America, as will be later discussed.


17 Pomeroy, 91.


19 Garrison, 143-144; Pomeroy, 97.
Despite this, men were, ostensibly, still to be figured as masters: “the gods are unambiguously seen as the extension of the dominant structure of society, that is, as analogous to (male) humans in motivation,”\(^\text{20}\) with men acting as the protectors of their womenfolk for the good of society. Women were, of course, to act under a certain veil of propriety: morality, above all, was the hallmark and calling-card of Athenian female, women who were also to be loving mothers, stalwart workers, and caretakers of the domestic peace, granted the protection of law after the death of her spouse and her entrance into old age. And this is not to say that Greek men felt ambivalent about women. Indeed, scholars attest that women were greatly missed while the men were away from home, and were devoutly mourned when they died; the soldier away from his spouse fought with her on his mind, hoping by his warlike endeavors to save her from the rape and molestation that would surely follow an enemy victory.\(^\text{21}\)

With such paternalistic, albeit kindly, sentiments in mind, it comes as no surprise to learn that “the Athenians liked their women invisible, domestic, and submissive, tolerating female assertiveness only in tragedy or the fantasy plots of Old Comedy.”\(^\text{22}\) Indeed, it is argued (and, as will be discussed later, argued wrongly) that women were seen by men collectively as something inherently holding men back from their potential, something to “escape in order to found and preserve the city.”\(^\text{23}\) Contemporary viewpoints of women in Athens (and, indeed, all of Greece, excepting Sparta) have been interpreted by foregoing scholarship as seeing women as “inferior –


\(^{21}\) Ide, 18; Pomeroy, 91, 92; Schops, 196. Shaw, 256.

\(^{22}\) Garrison, 151.

as temptresses and destroyers, as necessary evils and as objects to regenerate the population,”

as the sources of social problems; virgins were considered savage, fierce things that only
marriage could tame, with women in general representing that which is beyond the civilized
realm,\textsuperscript{25} as “with the forces of life, with mountains and forests, with rivers, springs and
fountains.”\textsuperscript{26}

This multiple being of woman, this essence of “naturalness,” some have argued, is the
representative of powers able to destroy city-states, representing forces of disorder and discord,
reminding men of their limitations.\textsuperscript{27} Despite well-known tales wherein \textit{Persian} sons were able
to gain power through the aid of their mothers, Athenian women were the very antithesis, some
argue, of political power.\textsuperscript{28} This attitude, the argument goes, gave way to Greek tales of female
killers of men, who often use their abundant sexuality as bait for the trap.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, the Athenian
woman’s very domesticity is blamed for the creation of these stories by Philip Slater. As
summarized by Sarah Pomeroy,

\begin{quote}
According to the sociologist Philip Slater, the Athenian boy spent his early
formative years primarily in the company of his mother and female slaves. The
father passed the day away from home, leaving the son with no one to defend him
from the mother. The relationship between mother and son was marked by
ambiguity and contradiction. The secluded woman nursed a repressed hostility
against her elderly, inconsiderate, and mobile husband. In the absence of her
husband, the mother substituted the son, alternately pouring forth her venom and
doting on him. The emotionally powerful mother impressed herself upon the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Ide, 13.

\textsuperscript{25} Gould, 52, 53; Ide, 17.

\textsuperscript{26} Gould, 52.

\textsuperscript{27} Saxonhouse, 404.


\textsuperscript{29} Gould, 55.
imagination of the young boy, becoming the seed, as it were, which developed into the dominant female characters of the mature playwright’s mind.³⁰

Put another way, the often murderous heroines of Athenian tragedy may have derived from the boy’s negative early impressions of his mother. The ‘anti-Mon’ commentators of the 1950s, as will be seen, wrote in a similar, and more insidious, vein.

Socially, the Athenian woman was married at the onset of menarche, usually around 14, and could expect, on average, to die 22 years later, with her husband usually living to the ripe old age of 45. Throughout those 22 years of marriage, however, she was by no means to be included as a part of Athenian public and political life, the exclusive preserve of the Athenian male (who, as husband, was required by law to have intercourse with his wife three times per month). Indeed, her entire world was carefully circumscribed. While men were allowed to partake of premarital (and extramarital) sexual relations with slaves, kept women, courtesans, and other men (in this case, only a man of lower social rank would be acceptable), for women premarital intercourse was associated with treason, and reduction to the status of slave was often used as the routine punishment. Similarly, adultery, viewed as problematic because of the desire of men for their own offspring, was punishable by exclusive cloistering within the home.³¹

Conditions did not improve for a woman should she remain faithful: if she did not obey her husband’s demands, it was thought honorable for her to commit suicide and, thereby, regain whatever standing, station, and honor she had lost in his eyes. Indeed, the Greek woman was to submit wholly to whatever male power corresponded to her familial situation.³² Effectively, “the

³⁰Pomeroy, 95.
³²Ide, 38; Willner, 72.
social contract exchanged a wife’s sexual autonomy for social and economic security provided by her spouse.”

The wife, in essence, had no legal rights, even over the comportment of her person.

Ironically, while the wife was segregated and largely to be neither seen nor heard by the larger male society, other women less tied to the bonds of matrimony – including the mistresses often kept or visited by the Athenian male – were not quite so entirely bound. Similar to the mistresses and courtesans familiar to modern society, they only saw their lovers on occasion, the rest of their time being left open for other pursuits (or, as one scholar has noted, other lovers). These mistresses differed from prostitutes in that they were courted by men and often displayed in public. As Ide describes it, “a courtesan was sent for and she was selective with whom she favored,” she therefore was allotted a more liberated atmosphere than the Greek wives. But why should these women, no doubt as objectified in the eyes of their men as their wives, viewed as destroyers and sirens, be allowed this extra freedom? Perhaps, as was noted in the earlier discussion of theory, these women represented for the men who courted them the very kinds of power necessary for a man to possess in order to legitimate his position – power additional to, or in correspondence with, that held by their wives, who remained their exclusive possessions.

Indeed, in this conception, the very idea of woman as the inferior of man in the Greek/Athenian sense must be thrown out. Scholars noted above have often seen fit to portray Greek women’s “destructive tendencies” as an impediment to men, thus relegating women to a position below the males. However, with careful review, this idea seems counter-intuitive: if

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33 Garrison, 143.
34 Ide, 28.
36 Ibid, 48.
women possess power so destructive that it would destroy society if it were released, would not woman’s power be viewed as being greater than man’s? Indeed, such a conception is current in the Muslim world’s conception of female power and the necessity of the subordination of women – itself similar to that of the Greeks in all but this one important aspect. As Stacey and Price explain,

The whole system of the containment of women in Muslim societies is not based, as in the West, on the assumption of female inferiority. It is based upon the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings…. Muslim women are segregated because of their power over men, which, if let loose, would result in fitna, that is disorder, and chaos breaking out.  

As will be described later, such conceptions clearly can be seen in the interpretations of mythology produced in Athens of the fifth century. Indeed, these conceptions of the powerful woman who is desired by men for her power is prevalent in Greek myth, but by no means restricted to it: running parallel are the ideas of women present in the society and the comic books of postwar America.

World War II presented a number of opportunities for women to engage in activities on the homefront beyond their actual homes. With the workforce depleted of men due to escalating conflicts overseas, women were readily employed in any number of jobs throughout the domestic economy. However, “it was understood that when her fighting man came home, Rosie the Riveter would hand her riveting gun back over and pick up her frying pan and knitting needles again.” Indeed, the early postwar period proved to be a “Back-To-The-Kitchen” movement, in

37 Stacey and Price, 39.
38 Fingeroth, 82.
which women were no longer encouraged to exert their will in the world of business, and instead returned to their former lives of (ostensible) domestic bliss. Indeed, women were again imagined as the arbiters of order and peace in the home, an ideological tack present in western cultures for centuries. Women were seen by the overall male society ideally as mothers who raised their children to be upright men and women, adequate citizens in a democratic society, echoing the Greek exhortation of the moral, honorable paradigm for the domestic woman.

However, there was a distinctly darker side to this interest in domestic tranquility. In the 1950s, commentators expressed anxiety over what they saw as a declining, feminized and feminizing society. Men, they said, were losing their necessary territories in the home an inch at a time, forced to spend hours they’d rather spend in solitude with their families, making them feel increasingly trapped as the ethos of togetherness, both at home and at work, pervaded societal expectations. No longer a haven or castle, the commentators painted the home as a sparring-ground between spouses. While men and women were still viewed in their traditional roles of, respectively, worker and nurturer, as Keir Keightly notes, “housewives were cast in

39 Ibid.


Women were shown to be violently effective movers and shakers who could still act in the commercial sphere, pushing already marginalized men further out of their wonted social roles and, effectively, out of reach of any kind of redeeming masculinity. The growing presence of women in the worlds of work and other bends and corners of society seemed to indicate a slow decline of the present order.

Mothers especially seemed to bear the brunt of social anxiety. Mothers came to be blamed for a host of social ills, from authoritarian governments to run-of-the-mill troublemaking. These women, who had gained independent experience as workers during the war years, were described as capitalizing on those experiences and contributing to the downfall of American masculinity. Such problems created anxiety about the increase of homosexuality in the United States, with the mother supposedly pulling the strings in a prelude to societal meltdown.

Indeed, the charge [was] that women had either actually usurped male roles or aggrandized their traditional vocation of motherhood into the inflated and potent figure of “Mom.” By whatever means, guile or competition, they had become the dominant sex within the family. In a kind of Freudian nightmare, Moms seized the initiative in raising sons and in doing so, refused to allow them to mature, resulting in a variety of aberrant behaviors.

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44 Keightly, 154.
45 Gilbert, 63, 65-66.
46 Terry, 170.
47 Gilbert, 62, 66; Terry, 169, 170.
48 Gilbert, 67.
Such sentiments echo beliefs fostered by Athenian men about their own wives as the potential destroyers of the social order. Women in the 1950s were viewed, by virtue of their freedom during the war years, as possessing inordinate amounts of power, a power which, if unchecked, spelled the end for a male-dominated society. All the more reason, then, that they should be kept at home where they would legitimate male dominance by demonstrating men’s control over women’s power via matrimonial possession.

EC Comics, a brief history of which was given in the last chapter, are often conceived of as shedding a metaphorical spotlight on “a side of the nuclear family that clearly challenged the 1950s hegemonic view of American family happiness.” The EC crime comic books specifically served as able critics of the 1950s social climate, expressing the domestic bliss of that era as not at all idyllic, but fraught with peril and fear. However, as will be argued below, the women in the horror comic books offered by EC in the early 1950s are not necessarily what they seem: far from being exemplars of a domestic world turned upside-down, they represent the powerful female objects desired by the man of postwar America to retain and augment his position in an anxious climate of a society waiting for war.

In the context of cultural and political matters in fifth-century Athens and postwar America we can see how the ideas of the woman as an object necessary to masculine power in both societies operates in the myths and comics books. Athenian mythology of the fifth century itself is fraught with these tales. Among them is the tale of Oedipus, remembered in Athenian

49 Weston, 49.

tragedy in Sophocles’ masterful *Oedipus the King*.\(^{51}\) The full version of the myth relates that in days gone by Laius, king of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, gave birth to a son, who was prophesied to kill his father and marry his mother. In fear for his life, Laius ordered the child abandoned in the wilderness. However, a kindly shepherd discovered the child and delivered him to Polybius, the king of Corinth, in whose court the child, christened Oedipus, grew up. Grown to maturity, Oedipus was told by an oracle that he was still destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Not wishing to kill his Corinthian parents, the only parents he had known, Oedipus struck out on his own and, along the way, met a man who, unbeknownst to him, was Laius, his biological father. The two quarrel and Oedipus kills Laius in a fight. Continuing on his way, Oedipus is confronted by the Sphinx, a female beast with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, the tail of a serpent, and the wings of an eagle, who challenges men to a riddling contest and, should they fail, eats them. Oedipus, being clever, is able to answer the riddle of the Sphinx, who then kills herself. Hailed as a hero, Oedipus is swept into Thebes where, since Laius had been killed, he is proclaimed king and married to Jocasta, his mother.\(^{52}\)

In this story we see that Oedipus’s eventual coronation as the king of Thebes is dependent on his acquisition of the power of two women. In killing the Sphinx, a female monster and repository of knowledge, he has symbolically obtained the wisdom to rule as king (indeed, as noted earlier, it is often the hero’s duty to kill a female deity or monster to achieve fame), while through marrying Jocasta, the sometime queen of Thebes, a woman of political power, Oedipus has effectively sealed his position as monarch.


\(^{52}\) Graves, 371-372.
This can be taken further in examining the myths surrounding the return of Odysseus from the Trojan War, which was itself represented on public monuments (albeit not necessarily Athenian)\textsuperscript{53} of the period. We find, for instance, that on his return trip to Ithaca Odysseus becomes the lover of the sorceress Circe, which earns him the right to rule over her domain of Aeaea. Further, Odysseus’s final task in his homecoming is to kill those suitors who have sought the hand of his wife, Penelope, in his absence. All 112 of these suitors are slain by Odysseus before he can reclaim Penelope and, effectively, reclaim the land of his nativity. In these tales, the woman is not a character in and of herself, but a receptacle of power which, once obtained, bestows that power onto her possessor. Indeed, for the man to obtain power, the attainment of the woman is necessary.

In EC’s horror comics of the 1950s, this theme of the woman as necessary object for the attainment of power is carried to extreme, almost laughably gruesome lengths. In Al Feldstein and Wally Wood’s tale “Judy, You’re Not Yourself Today,” published in the August-September 1951 issue of \textit{Tales from the Crypt}, Donald and Judy Ableson, a happy couple, find their domestic bliss torn asunder when an evil hag knocks at their door while only Judy, the happy housewife, is home alone. Envious of Judy’s beauty, the hag uses sorcery to change bodies with the woman. Though, in the end, Donald discovers the switch and kills the hag, she is still able to transfer her consciousness to Judy’s body, and put Judy’s mind into her own rotting corpse. In the end, to release Judy from (literally) a fate worse than death, Donald must kill his wife’s body and break the spell, despite losing her forever.\textsuperscript{54} Here, we find the man, Donald, desperate to retain the power of his wife – in this case, a more generalized power as a domestic possession

\textsuperscript{53} See Tarbell, 229.

conferring status upon Donald, which has been taken from him by the hag; indeed, he must obtain the power of both women: by killing the hag he takes (through destruction) her power of witchcraft, and retains (albeit briefly) the love and power of his wife.

Another, more explicit story appeared in the June-July issue of *The Vault of Horror* that same year. In this tale, “Southern Hospitality,” Abner Scanlon, a professional cad, travels to Georgia in search of women. There he meets Claudia, the beautiful daughter of an old southern family he presumes to be rich. However, after marrying Claudia, Scanlon discovers that the family is on its last dime. Disappointed, Abner, in a series of episodes, insults the dignity of the family and accidentally kills Claudia’s matronly mother (she suffers a heart attack due to his rudeness) and her southern colonel-esque father (in a mild fight, a punch to the jaw breaks the old man’s neck) and, with the family suddenly out of the way, plans to sell the only thing of value to the family: their plantation. However, in a bit of *deus ex machina*, Abner’s plans are foiled when the family’s honored Civil War ancestor rises from the grave and kills him.55

In the tale, Abner is explicitly portrayed as an individual in desperate need of female power to legitimize his social station. Early in the story, the narrator notes that

Narrator: Abner Scanlon was a gigolo! Because he so disliked work…and since he was so handsome…he preyed on rich women, and used his wiles to slyly draw money from them.56

Later, following his marriage to Claudia and subsequent discovery that her family is penniless, Abner flies into a fit of rage and reveals his motives in obtaining Claudia as his own:

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56 Ibid, 1.
Abner (to Claudia): Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I don’t love you! I only married you because I thought you were rich!  

For Abner, the money possessed by any woman (in this case, Claudia) equals the power gained by obtaining her as an object. It is a more tangible form, to be sure, and not only psychologically but also materially has the ability to further his social legitimation.

Further examples of this view can be found in the *Crypt of Terror* story “The Maestro’s Hand,” published in the summer of 1950. In this, Dr. Emmanuel Hellman, a physician, was engaged to be married to the beautiful Virginia Caddy. However, after attending a recital one evening by the famed pianist Vladimir Borrstein, Virginia becomes enchanted by the talented musician and, after meeting him following the performance, begins to spend more time with him. After Vladimir injures his hand superficially and goes to see Hellman, Hellman hatches a plan to regain Virginia’s affections: he puts Borrstein under sedation and cuts off his hand, rendering him unable to play the piano. However, Hellman’s plan backfires horribly: Virginia leaves him, and Borrstein commits suicide. Harried and regretful, Hellman retreats to a cabin where he finds the severed and vengeful hand of Borrstein waiting for him.  

This grisly tale again notes the male societal mania to obtain a woman, as we find the narrator telling the audience  

Narrator: Ah, dear reader! What evils men will commit for the love of a beautiful woman! And Dr. Hellman was no exception.

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In both these postwar comic book tales, and in the myths prevalent in the fifth century, we can see that women were objectified as items to be obtained for the enhancement of male societal power. The question remains, however: to what end this power? In what ways can this conceptualization of female power be used by the male to legitimate his social position?

In his article “Beautiful Evil: Pandora and the Athena Parthenos,” Jeffrey M. Hurwit makes an interesting argument. He states that that the appearance of Pandora, a rather ignoble figure in Greek myth (indeed, as the first women, she is responsible for releasing all of the evils into the world), on the base for the Athenian fifth-century statue of the Athena Parthenos was meant to represent the antithesis of Athena: as Athens’ patron goddess, she was herself disassociated from all things female.⁶⁰

I take issue with his interpretation. Hurwit overlooks the most obvious facet of the appearance of Pandora: the fact that she is on the base of the statue. Pandora in myth was created by Zeus out of revenge for the affronts of Prometheus. As the first woman, she was forbidden to open a particular jar but disobeyed, releasing from it all of the evils of the world, including old age. However, this story is not so much a commentary on Pandora herself as it is on the world order at-large: Pandora is the creator of the world as it is. By releasing (accidentally) evil into the world, she is, effectively, giving birth to the world as it is known by mortals. Thus, her appearance on the base of the Athena Parthenos makes perfect sense: Pandora represents present reality, the present world order, on which Athens (exemplified by Athena) is based. So, in a similar vein, I argue that the conceptual power of women so coveted by men is that self-same power to bring understandable order to the world. This concept of woman as arbiter of a civilized, evening order is discussed by Ayala H. Gabriel, in her article “Living with Medea and Thinking After Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealment.” Gabriel argues that Medea’s

⁶⁰ Hurwit, 171-186.
actions (in the fifth century drama that bears her name) of killing her children and the fiancé of her ex-husband, Jason, are in order to maintain a social balance of power— in the end, Medea becomes an embodiment of the social order. Ayala notes that this representation may be applied to other women of Greek tragedy. I agree and, in the forthcoming pages will do so; however, I feel that this idea can be universalized even more: the concept of women representing a concept of social order can be applied to show how the conceptual and cultural power of women is viewed and represented in the Cold War United States. As will be seen, the women in the mythic representations of fifth century Athens and the comics of postwar United States represent this self-same trait— instead of being the destroyers of order as they are often portrayed by male culture as, they are, in fact, arbiters of it.\footnote{Ayala H. Gabriel, “Living with Medea and Thinking After Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealments: \textit{Cultural Anthropology} 7, no. 3 (Aug. 1992): 364-373; Graves, 143-145.}

In myth, we find that in the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, Jason is lost without Medea, his female counterpart. Indeed, without her, it would have been impossible for the hero to obtain the golden fleece. Medea is herself the daughter of the king of Colchis and, what is more, the granddaughter of the god, Helius. In the myth, Medea uses her decidedly unique powers— both magical and intellectual— to aid Jason, her newfound love, in recovering the fleece. She causes the dragon guarding the fleece to fall asleep, and, in the getaway, kills her half-brother, Aspyrtus, and cuts up his corpse, throwing his pieces into the ocean to slow down their pursuers. Further, for Jason’s benefit, she tricks the daughter of Thessaly’s monarch, Pelias, into killing him so that Jason could have his throne (which Jason, ever the hero, refuses). Later, however, we find that Medea has cause for revenge against Jason. Years later, discovering that Medea has slain the king of Corinth to allow him to ascend to the throne, Jason threatens Medea with divorce in hopes of marrying the Theban princess, Glauce. Medea, incensed, kills Glauce and her father,
Creon. Then, according to Euripides’ tragedy, her own children by Jason. As Gabriel writes, Jason’s “violation of the oaths makes it impossible for his line to continue. So Medea kills his new bride, destroying all hope of further children, and then kills the now cursed children he already has…. It is as a social person that Medea, like other heroes in drama…affirms social order over chaos. Euripides allows a woman to emerge as an agent of the social order and act according to universalistic principles and an ethic of justice. Her actions are guided by such cultural values as friendship, honor, and respect for oaths and hospitality.” As Gabriel argues, Medea is an agent of society, and her power is thus couched in societal norms. Thus, the man who obtains Medea – and does so successfully – obtains the ability to preserve the social order.

The same may be said for another famous woman of fifth-century tragedy, Clytemnestra. In myth, Clytemnestra, said in some legends to be one of the products of the union of Leda, queen of Sparta, and the god Zeus (who mated with her in the form of a swan), was married to the Greek king Agamemnon. While Agamemnon was away during the Trojan War, Clytemnestra took Aegisthus, Agamemnon’s enemy, as her lover. She had cause to despise Agamemnon: her husband made a sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigeneia, and came back home from the war with spoils in the person of Cassandra, daughter of the Trojan king Priam, and a woman with whom he’d already begotten sons. A vengeful Clytemnestra kills them both.

In Aeschylus’ tragic retelling of these happenings, the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra eloquently expresses why she killed her husband, making it clear that her acts are not motivated by anger, but cool retribution:

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62 Gabriel, 351, 352; Graves, 600-601, 603, 612-614, 615-617.

63 Gabriel, 364-365.

64 Graves, 206-207, 413-416.
Clytemnestra: …he slaughtered like a victim his own child, my pain/grown into love…./Now hear you this, the right behind my sacrament:/By my child’s justice driven to fulfillment, by/her Wrath and Fury/to whom I sacrificed this man…/he,/this other, is fallen, stained with this woman you behold [Cassandra]/plaything of all the golden girls at Ilium…./I will take some small/measure of our riches, and be content/that I swept from these halls/the murder, the sin, and the fury.  

We see in the acts of Clytemnestra the very model of the social order-oriented woman described by Gabriel: she brings alignment to the horrors around her, and is an arbiter of (at least in her mind) justice in her house. For the man who possesses her (and does nothing to incense her), Clytemnestra would act as an object of order, and power that could be used to further that man’s social position.

Such socially-retributive women are frequently found in the EC horror comic books of the 1950s. The story “Zombie!” published in the August-September issue of The Crypt of Terror, is one such tale. The story involves Daniel King, a young reporter who is the guest of a certain Mr. Richards, who owns a plantation in Haiti. One evening, the pair hears drums in the surrounding jungle, and Richards tells King that that night is “Voodoo Night,” when the natives perform strange rites, and no outsider is safe outdoors. King, disregarding Richards’ warnings, takes his camera and goes to the ritual site, where he finds the natives dancing around a great fire. In the midst of their dance, they tie a desiccated corpse to a pole near the fire, and, through magic, the corpse – that of a woman – comes alive, restored to living flesh. King takes a photo, but the flash startles the natives and the spell is broken, the reanimated corpse falling to the ground. Frightened, King runs back to Richards, who recounts for him the tale of the plantation’s former, cruel owner, Jason Morgan, and his kindly wife, Marie. Marie would often join in the natives’ festivities, despite Jason’s stern warnings. At last enraged at her, Jason killed Marie.

However, the natives subsequently resurrected her and used her reanimated corpse to kill Jason.\textsuperscript{66}

In his telling of the story, Richards makes it plain that Marie’s ‘zombified’ corpse – truly the agent of the surrounding society in Gabriel’s sense – is acting retributively, to set the world of the natives back to rights:

Richards: That same night, after Jason had left, the voodoo drums pulsed through the jungle…the forces of black magic were conjured up and by their evil power Marie became one of the living dead! She was a zombie! The natives sent her to Jason…\textit{she was to wreak vengeance upon him for his sins}…\textsuperscript{67}

A similar story is recounted in the tale of “Madam Bluebeard,” appearing in the midwinter 1952 issue of \textit{Tales from the Crypt}. It seems that a woman, Teresa, has killed all seven of her husbands, who the public believes all died accidentally through various means: electrocution, hunting accidents, car crashes, nasty falls, etc. Teresa’s reasoning for her capital offenses, the narrator tells us, stems from her youth – Teresa’s mother, after being left by her husband with only herself to care for their daughter, instilled in Teresa the idea that men are evil and should be dealt with accordingly. In the end, however, Teresa’s dead husbands give their vengeful bride her comeuppance, rising from the grave, killing her, and burying her alongside their seven graves.\textsuperscript{68} It is Teresa’s highly-honed sense of retribution, of setting the scales right, that drives her crimes, however grisly, and reveals her inherent power, again, to be that which seeks to put the world in balance.


\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 6. Italics mine.

\textsuperscript{68} Al Feldstein and Joe Orlando, “Madam Bluebeard,” \textit{Tales from the Crypt} 27 (December-January 1952) 1-7, in \textit{Tales From the Crypt}, Vol. 2 (West Plains, Mo.: Russ Cochran, 1979).
A final, and aptly-titled, horror yarn will help cement the point. Entitled “About Face!” this story appeared in the late summer issue of EC’s *Vault of Horror* in 1951. It concerns Lydia Armstrong, a famous, wealthy, and beautiful lion-tamer in the circus. She performs to great acclaim, and without incident, until the day a panther attacks her and horribly mauls her face. Despite her wealth, doctors are unable to abate the horrible scars and return to Lydia her wonted appearance. Always veiled so that none can see her disfigured face, Lydia takes to reading books on witchcraft for spells to restore her beauty. Steve, Lydia’s chauffeur, interested in the woman’s money, tells her that he doesn’t care what she looks like (despite almost fainting when she unveils herself to him), and Lydia takes the bait. She quickly falls in love with the cad and, what is more, gives him power of attorney over her entire financial world. Inevitably, Steve cleans Lydia out and leaves her for the life of a bon vivant, but Lydia quickly exacts her revenge: using the spells she’s learned in her reading, she transfers her scars to Steve and regains her beauty. Again, we see that the power of powerful women is based on retribution, on repaying wrongs to smooth the path. Lydia, just like Medea and Clytemnestra before her, in Gabriel’s model, is an agent for social stability, ensuring that wrong is punished and the victims rewarded.\(^{69}\)

As we have seen, women in both Athenian and postwar American societies were (and, perhaps, still are) viewed by men as objects to be obtained by the man. Indeed, the above shows that cultural, mythological and comic book representations of women reveal they were not considered to be weak by men but instead possessed, in male psychology, a kind of inherent power. This power, utilizing the concepts of Gabriel, is entirely societal: woman, as inherent supporter of the social order, transfers (in male psychology) her power to the male once he has

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obtained her, enabling him to legitimize his role as head of the household and, more broadly, society. That such conceptions are present in these two time periods should not surprise us: in fifth century Athens, as well as 1950s America, as stated in previous chapters, the society viewed itself as under siege from ideological others intent not merely on physical harm, but also on ideological harm that would change the very basis of American and Athenian ways of life. If a man could, in some way, obtain more power with which to stabilize masculine society, he might just be able to save the land he loves. Jennifer Terry makes a similar argument when she that in 20th century America “one can find striking correlations between moments when cultural norms of gender and sexuality are destabilized and waves of political anxiety….” Such can be said for Athens as well. To retain mastery of what he viewed as a swiftly-changing political and social structure, man had to keep hold of woman – not because she had the potential to destroy but, rather, because she could create, and create order at that.

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70 Terry, 170.
CONCLUSION

It should come as no surprise to the reader that, if you were to take a cursory glance at my bookshelves, you would find them split into, essentially, three large classes: books concerned with history (largely relating to pre-modern, and especially ancient Mediterranean, history), books on mythology (again, largely centered on religions of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East), and books relating to the creation, interpretation, history, and meaning of comic books. Among those in this latter category is a peculiar piece, the comic book which I have owned the longest: a copy of *The Arabian Nights* (including an audio cassette so that a young mythology enthusiast could follow along if they hadn’t quite mastered the skill of reading) published in the 1980s by Fischer-Price. It is a tall, slim, battered purple volume with a painted cover featuring Scheherazade: she is meditating cross-legged, holding a crystal ball. The creatures and heroes of the wondrous stories she related over 1,001 nights to her sultan-husband dance around her in the incense-smoke.

When I consider the origins and meaning that I wanted to convey in the preceding chapters, I continuously return to this image of my beloved comic book, tattered and vandalized by waterproof markers. It is, really, the perfect image: an ancient story (rather, a series of ancient stories) with meanings developed by (and ostensibly relevant to) another people, another age, another place translated to another people in another age and another place so that a young boy could find his own world of meaning in them. The ancient translated to the modern – the ancient made usable to the modern.

As a society, we are forever looking backward – more, I should think than we look forward. We find power and meaning in the past, looking for giants’ shoulders to stand on. In our
system of jurisprudence, precedent is treated as gospel. Legally, the bases of our laws and ideas are now centuries old; the major religions of the world are, at their youngest, nearly 1,400 years old. Our holidays celebrate ancient people and ancient happenings, or, even if recently created, are based on the old, the revered, the “timeless.” We draw strength through this connection to the past.

It is no different in the popular culture of our day – or of the days half a century ago. The 1950s and 1960s saw rushes of films with ancient themes recounting the life of Christ, the fall of the Roman Empire, the Hebrew escape from bondage, the rise of the Egyptian pyramids, and the rebellion of gladiatorial slaves. In more recent decades, the themes of science fiction/adventure films and novels of the 1970s through the 1990s have made it clear – metaphorically at least – that the ancient past is relevant to the present: in films and books such as Lucas and Spielberg’s Indiana Jones trilogy, Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash, Luc Besson’s The Fifth Element, Devlin and Emerich’s Stargate, and even the pop “pulp-history” of Graham Hancock (The Sign and the Seal, Fingerprints of the Gods), the acquisition of ancient artifacts and secrets, lost for centuries or millennia, by people in the modern day translates that ancient power into the present and makes relevant again what was lost. In our popular culture, everything old – in more ways than one – is new again.

It was similar for the ancient Athenians and, in fact, for the Hellenic world-at-large. Their foundational myths following the creation of humanity point to the ancient, early days – with a few exceptions – as golden, haleyon ages before the trials and tribulations of modern life crept in. There was power and joy in the old times for ancient Greeks. The past was special.¹

The connection, then, between past and present is important psychologically for the Cold War U. S. and fifth-century Athens because each culture drew metaphorical power from its study – intellectual stimulation, perhaps, emotional fulfillment, or, possibly, material gain. The past contains something that the present must necessarily understand or possess. In this way, at least symbolically, the yearning of the present for the past renders the two similar to one another – barriers of culture, time, and geography are, essentially, broken when they meet, at least from the comfortable perspective of the onlooker.

However true this might be, at first glance the foregoing arguments in this work may seem downright counterintuitive. While I was in the process of creating this text, a number of people commented on the fact that they never would have tried to put fifth-century Athens and 1950s America side-by-side, let alone mythology and comic books from those respective periods. Indeed, those two media couldn’t be, at first glance, more different: myths are – lest we forget – sacred texts, related to the deep-seated beliefs of a particular people or culture (indeed, what contemporaries called a religion may, when seen through the lenses of time and cultural shift, become mythology, just as a dinosaur’s bones, after eons in the earth, become a fossil); comic books are profane (sometimes literally), relating largely to secular matters; myth is aimed at a wide cultural audience, usually an entire people; comic books (especially of the 1950s), are aimed at a niche market, and the characters’ stories are usually not a widely-referenced part of the cultural lexicon (although, of late, this seems to be changing); myth appeared (as attested in the above arguments) in a wide variety of formats, from orally-related tales to dramas, public buildings, monuments and public works, pottery, religious festivals, and, essentially, were facets of everyday life. In the 1950s comics, aside from the odd television show or toy, were hardly as ubiquitous, their characters and themes relegated to the four-color newsprint pages.
Despite these seemingly overwhelming differences, the previous chapters show that myth and comic books did exhibit similarities that breached their respective physical and philosophical media. The chief and underlying argument is that societies undergoing similar cultural and political circumstances exhibit their feelings about these similar circumstances in similar ways through their cultural products. As shown, the political and cultural climates of fifth-century Athens and early postwar America were similar: both societies, after facing a powerful enemy in a hotly contested war, a war which involved, to some extent, an invasion or an attack on the homeland, found themselves in an entirely changed political climate. Athens found itself to be largely the soul beneficiary of the Persian defeat, with the allegiance of better than half of the Greek states, a mighty military, financial prosperity, and, essentially, political carte blanche. It also found itself to be one of two great powers in the region, facing the increasing frustration and skepticism of its ideological, geographical and ethnic opposite number, Sparta, and its allies.

The United States occupied a similar position in 1945: the chief power of the victorious four after the Second World War, America was alone of all western powers, the one with enough power and clout to order the affairs of the “civilized” postwar world, with a great collection of allies and moral rectitude. It also faced the increasing aggression of the Soviet Union, whose perceived desire to control the globe seemed well on its way following the war, with the acquisition of Eastern Europe, which continued on into the next decade. Each culture’s respective ways of life seemed to stand on the very knife’s end of disaster. Facing enemies that could infiltrate ideologically from within just as they could attack physically from without, Athens and the United States each feared for their own survival – not merely physical survival, but ideological survival as well. A person could be sacrificed for the cause, but the intangibles,
the ideals for which each stood, could not, or that would spell the end of all they valued. For them, it was not life alone that was important, but the way of life, rhetoric to the contrary.

The reactions of those respective cultures to such cultural and political anxieties I outlined in terms of a “Cold War mentality,” a progressive psychological process. The first stage of this process involved patriotism and an increased sense of what it meant to live – and be a citizen – in Athens and America. In Athens, the thus-far ignored early acts of Theseus, Athens’ national hero, in which he cleared the nearby coastline of bandits and criminals, could be read as a veritable catechism of Athenian values, with each of the stories adding a new wrinkle to what it meant to be an Athenian. In America, the time- and globe-spanning adventures of Superman, and Batman and Robin, served a similar outlet as means to show difference between American and other ways of life, with the logical ending that American ways were the best. In declaring American superiority, these tales revealed what it meant to be an American, and what patriotic values should be followed.

The next stage of this process necessitated giving the patriot something to fight, something to which to compare itself. In Athenian public art and myth, the Amazon warrior had long been considered a proxy of the Persian threat, or of anti-civilization barbarism in general, but I read the protean figures of the Amazons in another way, as representative of the Spartan menace facing Athens – ethnically other, with military prowess and espousing a diametrically opposed political system, the Amazons seemed to stand in perfectly for their Spartan enemies; however, the Amazons, as did the Spartans, posed more of an ideological than physical threat to Athenian society. The EC science-fiction comics of the 1950s’ ostensibly liberal take on postwar American life could also contain seriously conservative components, using (as did other media) the tack that the Soviet enemy could be represented by the racially (and galactically) othered
space alien. However, just as the Amazons in Athens represented less a physical than an ideological threat, so were the comic book aliens more interested in usurping the American political system than merely killing all Americans.

Finally, with the patriot defined and given something against which to battle, this character needed a means to gain psychological strength to fight the attacking ideological enemy. The ideal source for such power, in these male-dominated cultures, seemed to be women. In fifth-century Athens, women were severely constrained by male society and law, with commentators most often interpreting this as a sign that women, considered to be dangerous by men, should be kept out of their way. Similarly, in postwar America, following the liberating spree of women working outside the home during World War II, they were forced back into their roles of wives and mothers by a returning male workforce. Social commentators of the time continually harped at this American woman, describing her as a leech that sucked men’s masculinity and dominated society, prescribing that ‘Mom’ be kept down by her menfolk. I, however, argued that instead of being seen as beings of inferior ability obstructing male society, or destructors of a male-dominated society, the inherent power of women in both Athens and postwar America seemed, instead, to be something that men believed they needed to legitimate their roles in a society which they saw as their own. Examples of men who completed harrowing missions (or committed terrible crimes) to acquire women were legion in both contemporary myths and the horror comic books published, again, by EC in the 1950s. Indeed, it seemed, using the theories of Ayala Gabriel, that the power men viewed as inherent in women (again viewed through the lens of fifth-century tragedy and 1950s horror comics) was one of social conservatism, a power that set the scales of society aright and punished wrongs. Such a power was psychologically invaluable to the men of both societies, who feared that their world was
shortly to come down about their ears. If these men possessed woman domestically, her power was theirs to use, and the balance of power in their anxious masculine societies could be restored.

In these three cases, the Cold War mentality affected both societies similarly, and each expressed their anxieties in similar ways through their cultural products. In this way, at least, the temporally, culturally, and geographically disparate cultures of fifth-century Athens and postwar America, separated by more than 2,350 years, are similar.

But, what does this mean, exactly?

It would be easy enough to write this off, first, to coincidence – that societal and cultural matters in both of these different societies randomly coalesced in similar ways, and they expressed themselves similarly because of a quirk of eternity. Essentially, in this view, the vapors of history formed in similar patterns around these two cultures and then, like storm clouds, dissipated. Certainly this argument can be made, but it is too simple and, ultimately, not at all satisfying. If the purpose of comparative history is (as it is in my mind) to find meaning in the similarities and differences between cultures, and if history is itself, at heart, a discipline based on the concept of the inherent usability of the scraps of the past that have come down to us, then to make the coincidence argument renders the above examples effectively useless.

Another, more cogent, argument would be to chalk up the similarities to the unifying effects of human nature. In this idea, each person is seen as similar to one another, and is, like any other animal, subject to the slings and arrows of psychology and physiology: they cannot escape what they are, and will react – despite changes in time, tempo, place and purpose – to the same things in similar ways at all times. In this case, history not only will repeat itself, but must,
with only slight changes. Change and similarity are both continual constants, swirling together in eternity like frozen yogurt.

This argument is more attractive and less problematic than the first – indeed, it fits in well with Alun Munslow’s definition of constructionist history.² It allows us to look to the future and take power from the past – as humanity is wont to do – by taking past patterns and predicting what humanity will do in the future, so that forthcoming signs of trouble may be headed off. This, however, fails to account for one thing: humans are human. As an organism, as other theorists have pointed out, humans are as unpredictable as nature itself. To say that people will behave in exactly the same way at all times, while a secure (yet chilling) dream, is inaccurate.

So, then, what is to be learned from the foregoing arguments? If it is true, as I have argued, that societies under similar social pressures have revealed similar social anxieties in similar ways via their cultural products, how can we make this knowledge usable – make it relevant? We must first take into consideration the fact that mythology and comic books are both (largely) fictional creations; in this, their purpose is to impart a story, instill a lesson, or make a certain rhetorical or societal point – this much I made clear in the preceding chapters.

To go along with this, both myths and comic books are consumables, and are fairly equal on that score. While myths were (and, perhaps, for certain sects of societies, continue to be) possessed of religious significance, few would argue the point that they were as commonly accessible as any comic book rack in a 1950s five and dime, both speaking a similar language of words, pictures, and meaning. These creations prima facie, however, are never the last word: whatever they are on the surface, as consumables they and their messages are forever at the mercy of the consumer, who takes the relayed messages, interprets them, and accepts or rejects them in whole or in part. As consumable vehicles for political messages, which I laid out

previously, myths and comics are both well-known when taken separately. However, when analyzed side-by-side and revealed as similar, these consumables reveal startling likenesses. These likenesses are not merely revealed through the archetypes of heroes and villains that appear across comic books and mythology, but in the messages that they relayed to similar people in similar ways.

All of this may seem to indicate that I am revving up to equate comic books with myth; indeed, commentators suggest that comparisons of mythology to comic books (or, at least, the use of mythological themes in comic books) are meant – with more than a whiff of pretension – to raise comic books into an academic Olympus alongside the tales of hoary antiquity. This type of assertion is very forward-thinking, viewing, essentially, the present as equal to or better than the past. The reader will recall, however, that at the beginning of this conclusion, I stated that humanity is fairly addicted to looking backward. The analyses and arguments of the foregoing work were not intended to bring comic books up to the level of myth – quite the opposite, actually: I sought to bring myth down to the level of comic books.

Allow me to clarify this point, as it is not meant in any pejorative manner. More and more often, these days, I do not bemoan the ostensible underclass status of the comic book so much as I weep for the slipping grandeur of the Classics. Indeed, it seems to me that, to a great extent, comic books and myth have swapped their positions: the examples I gave in my introduction notwithstanding, comic books are now hip, while the Classics slowly waste away. Far too often, we see that Greek and Latin as teachable languages fall by the wayside – indeed, neither were offered in my high school, while both of my parents took Latin in their pre-collegiate education. Colloquially, Rome and Greece are less frequently subjects to be studied.

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and more often metaphors to be mined. Comedians in recent years have voiced the opinion that Greek mythology is the province of the socially inept, and Oedipus is more renowned for his connection to Freud than to the myths and tragedies that brought him forth in the first place. Indeed, even the films sporting classical content which I mentioned earlier have often been little more than vehicles for popular action stars or matinee idols (how much this has changed since the heyday of classically-oriented cinema, of course, can be disputed). Thus, the scale has shifted. Comic books are now a cultural vogue, and the days of antiquity are filed away on shelves.

But, if we take our binoculars – staring so intently at the present (with half a lens on the future, to be sure) – and shift them backwards to the past to view embattled Athens, so fearful of belligerent Sparta, using its own mythology to mediate between fear and action (myths that mimic our 1950s comic books in urgency of message, clarity of theme, and similarity of content) we can look up from the comics pages and find ourselves with spear and helmet behind the hoplon, or arrayed in white garments upon the Agora, eyes turned towards the Parthenon and the great image of towering Athena. Mythology, by this action, by its life next to comic books, is relevant, usable again. Comic books allow us to see mythology in a new and modern light, and break down the veils that separate us from those storytellers. It is a reciprocal relationship, really: one augments the other, each relates to the other, making one another that much clearer. The simplified windows of the present allow us that much better a look at the vibrant stained glass of the past.

Taking this thinking to heart, when we look at both the messages of myth and comic books in these respective periods, we can see that both societies are concerned not with what is going to happen or what has happened, but with what might happen: fifth-century Athens and postwar America were both waiting, eyes open, heads-cocked, for the other shoe to drop, and the
stories they presented in myth and comic were themselves metaphors for this long expectation, trying to calm their fears with tales of success or lessons on what to do. Under the conditions of the Cold War mentality, such entertainments helped their audiences to know what a patriot was (and how to become one), who their enemy was (and why), and how male society should most advantageously conceive of female society.

These ended up, without a doubt, being decidedly conservative viewpoints in both eras. Preservation, not innovation, was the watchword – at least to a point. When comparing Athenian and American Cold War societies, we find something interesting: the Athenian Cold War society was, in more ways than one, looking to return to the status quo it had before Spartan belligerence clouded its Mediterranean hegemony – by defeating Sparta, Athens would reclaim what it had lost, essential carte blanche in the Hellenic world. Not so with Cold War America. Following World War II, America herself was never indisputably at the top of the geopolitical food chain: from the start, the Soviet Union was taking great bites out of the U. S.’ sphere of influence, and while Spartan hatred of Athens was essentially ever-present after the Persian Wars, its teeth were not as explicitly bared as the USSR’s were so early on.

Indeed, it seems to me that there is an almost a casual certainty to the Greek tales. The Athenian myths discussed find the heroes, more often than not, easily meeting challenges that are merely thrown in their path along the way: Theseus accidentally encounters robbers, whom he skillfully dispatches; the Amazons invade unbidden (in one version, at least) but are easily beaten back; Clytemnestra easily kills her husband upon learning of his infidelity. They are sure of victory at all times. Not so with the American comic books – the tales are laden with a pressing obsession with victory, with meeting all challenges, with leaving no stone unturned. We see Batman and Robin called upon to defeat a criminal in England, well out of their jurisdiction;
Superman fights medieval injustice when he could have just as easily stood aside; common
Americans took the best action they knew in the face of alien invaders; and scorned women,
unwilling to live with dishonor, exacted spectacular vengeance. The myths of Athens were
steadfast, literally carved in stone and painted on clay. The stories in American comic books
were creations of paper, forever moving from one month to the next into the next thrilling
installment. Athens merely sought what it had already possessed. America reached for what
seemed like an unachievable goal.⁵

Perhaps these arguments say not so much about humanity as they do about its creations.
Indeed, there may be an even broader point to make here. The late mythology scholar Joseph
Campbell, in what may be called his “unifying theory of mythology,” brought fully to bear in his
landmark text, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, argues that all mythology serves the same
individual purpose, speaking to the basic process of human physical and spiritual maturation into
adulthood.⁶ Though public, myth speaks to the private development of us all into full human
beings, representing a journey of the soul. Scott McCloud, the modern apologist of the comics
medium, makes a similar argument about comic books themselves. In his Understanding
Comics: The Invisible Art,⁷ McCloud argues that comic books boast their own iconographic and
metaphysical world. Further, comics’ usually openly-drawn characters and static images allow
readers to “mask” themselves and become emotionally and psychologically-invested participants
in the stories, creating their own comic experience. Comic books, then, are also a deeply
personal experience, despite their creation for consumption by the mainstream.

⁵ See, for instance, Graves, 20-22; Hixson, xiii, xiv; and Michael S. Sherry, In the Shadow of War: The United States
Since the 1930s (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 129.
⁶ For an edifying, and somewhat challenging read, see Campbell, Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1973). This, however, is but one in a veritable library of books by Campbell on comparative
mythology. For a taste of that I’m getting at above, see page 387.
⁷ See McCloud, Understanding Comics, especially pages 25-135 (as this work is written in a comic book format,
this amount of reading recommended is hardly as daunting as it looks).
In this sense, comic books and mythology are perfect mediums for the expression of the kinds of societal anxieties seen in Athens and postwar America. Just as myth contains characters and stories that (as we have seen) can be adjusted to fit the needs of the artist or the times, comics’ iconography and accessibility, and its status as an artistic medium, can also be manipulated (albeit not in the pejorative sense). Art is meant to express human emotions and desires, whether conscious or subconscious. The time periods in question provided the impetus for artists and writers to do just that – to use the familiar to express their fears of the unfamiliar. We see the similar themes in myth and comics of Athens and postwar America not just because of the cultural similarities, but because of the similarities in the media used.

The underlying assumption behind the study of any society or time period is the same: the actions that took place, the events that happened, all involved people, and therefore, like spectators at a train wreck, other people will be interested in what transpires. In a similar fashion, knowing that the themes of fifth-century Athenian myths gel will with postwar American comic books is important to know because it reveals not necessarily something about human nature, but about the human act of creation: humanity tends to make the personal public – not for exhibitionist reasons but for societal ones. Humanity is interested in the continuation of its own society, and will express its anxieties about that society to that society in hopes of making it stronger. Public myths and public comic books are public expressions of private desires, which are themselves internalized in private consumption, and become part of a collective private consciousness. Such media serve didactic purposes, allowing the publicly private to become the privately public, continually disseminated and thought and spoken of and written about. Humanity, as Aristotle is so often quoted, is a political (read: social) animal. Its chief interest is
its own self-preservation in the bosom of society. Myth and comics allow humans to express their ideas on the subject, and help spread these arguments to others.
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