Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture

*Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*

*edited by*

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The Naked Hero and Model Man:  
Costumed Identity in Comic Book Narratives  

DAVID COUGHLAN

"Anyone who puts on a costume paints a bull's-eye on his family's chests." — Brad Meltzer and Rags Morales, *Identity Crisis*

**CHAPTER 13**

**The Naked Hero and Model Man:**  
Costumed Identity in Comic Book Narratives  

**DAVID COUGHLAN**

After the release of the film *Superman Returns* (2006), it was suggested that "It was inevitable ... that after 9/11 America's greatest superhero would come back to protect the threatened city of Metropolis" (French 2006, 15). In a time of need, a vulnerable populace, even an entire nation, could feel sheltered by the power of Superman. This has held true since Superman's very first appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, but what has also always been clear is that domestic security is as important to Superman as national security. Superman's second-ever heroic adventure is not saving the world but saving the life of a victim of domestic violence threatened by a knife-wielding husband. Since the moment of his creation, therefore, this hero of heroes has defended the idea of the home as a place of refuge from violence.

With each subsequent version of his story, the centrality of the home in Superman's system of values has been reemphasized. In 1938, the child Superman’s father is a nameless scientist on a distant planet, but by 1939 he is Jor-El of Krypton. Though John Byrne’s *The Man of Steel* in 1986 makes the citizens of Krypton emotionally colder in order to emphasize the warmth of Earth's welcome, the recent update *Superman: Birthright* gives Kal-El loving Kryptonian parents who treasure "Our son. The last of the El family. The last son of Krypton" (13). Similarly, the infant Superman is originally discovered by a "passing motorist" who "turned the child over to an orphanage" (Siegel and Shuster 1938, 1). But by the following year it is "an elderly couple," Jonathan and Martha Kent, who find and name the child Clark (Byrne 2003, 1). For creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the "love and guidance of his kindly foster parents was to become an important factor in the shaping of the boy's future" (Byrne 2003, 1), and every version since Byrne’s has underlined this theme. Although early stories saw the Kents dying after Clark's high school graduation, now they live to instill a sense of decency and responsibility in the growing superhero (see Gordon 2001). All that Superman stands for, "truth, justice, and the American way," has its source in a home life defined not by biological ties but by emotional and moral values. The loving respect and understanding that the Kents show each other as a couple is extended to include their adopted son, which provides him with a supportive environment and a sense of belonging.

Superman's 1996 marriage to Lois Lane further emphasizes his domestic ethos, but at the same time it highlights a peculiar lack of family life in the larger heroic community, despite the apparent significance of the home for the hero. This raises the question of how the hero relates to the domestic, and what it means to be a hero at home. More specifically, the question is what it means to have a superhero in the home, for the focus here is on the dominant and defining figure in comic books, the super-powered hero. It will be seen that the costumed form of the comic book superhero embodies a dominant masculinity which is identified in opposition to all things feminine, including the domestic. However, it will be argued that this apparent exclusion of the domestic can be reinterpreted as an exclusion from the domestic. The hero ultimately removes himself from the home because he cannot trust himself not to harm his family, given the violence that defines him as a man.

**Homeless Heroes**

The superhero's problematic relation to the home is already discernible in Superman's origin, as it is in the origin stories of countless other comic book heroes. Superman, like Batman and Robin, Captain Marvel and Spider-Man, is an orphan, and therefore immediately distanced from a natural, in the sense of biologically determined, experience of the domestic. Comic books, therefore, frequently show how those displaced from traditional familial structures, or denied lineal or territorial claims, can form other communities. Heroes form substitute families working from bases like the Batcave, the X-Men's School, the Avengers Mansion, the Justice League's Watchtower, the Fantastic Four's Baxter Building. Going into action, protecting their own
kind, wearing "team" colors, and using code names, heroes mirror the constructed family units of teams, cliques, and, especially, gangs, so that, as Scott Bukatman (2003) observes, "The corporation, the fraternity, the secret clubhouse, and the playground all provide alternative concepts of home and family" (57). Despite these alternatives, however, the enduring dream of the lost and unknown original family results in an unrealistic perception of life at home, at best as an ideal and at worst as an abstraction.

For the majority of heroes, this ungrounded view of the home is fostered by their being removed from it early on that is never tested by a return to it. As Jeffrey Brown (2001) recounts, "The narrative formula of the superhero story is essentially a modernized version of the classical hero myth" (146) where the "hero departs, goes forth, ... triumphs and returns" (Million 2004, 315). However, in comic books, this formula is both truncated and stretched, because the heroes do not return home but fight an unending adventure. As a result, superheroes tend to conform to types that Bonnie Million calls "outsider heroes," who "do not step back into society" (Million 2004, 315–6). This is, in fact, a necessary consequence of their being, as Brown (2001) indicates, the heroes of serial publications; since "the superhero must return every month for a new story, the hero's quest is never completely resolved via marriage" (147), meaning the formal arc of the comic book narrative never delivers an end to coincide with the domestic bliss that the hero's homespun morals seem to promise.

Double Identities

If, however, the "traditional hero myth is a coming of age story" and the "return ... signals the beginning of adulthood" so that "at the beginning of the hero's adult life, the story ends" (Million 2004, 316), then the described elements of comic narratives, resulting in a perpetual adolescence, naturally appeal to the teenagers who form the comic book's traditional audience. Kurt Busiek (2004) comments that "people think of the super-hero genre as inherently adolescent, all about a youngster's wish-fulfillment dreams of power" (ii), and suggests that "nowhere was this more evident than in Superman. Clark Kent was the shy adolescent.... But as fast as a teenager's voice cracks, he could become the über-adult, Superman, powerful, respected" (ii). Interestingly, Busiek, a comic book writer, presents Superman as an adult when he is still at the stage of "protecting the community" (Brown 2001, 146) and has not yet made the return in triumph that Million describes as initiating adulthood. Moreover by, by couching this as the "transformation from boy to man" (ii), Busiek shifts the focus from adulthood to manhood. This further fits the characteristics of the hero to the experiences of the comic readership's key demographic, the young male, while also apparently establishing what it means to be a man. Thus, Superman is not just a figure of fantasy, but he also represents the man that every boy could become, the "ideal of masculinity" (Pecora 1992, 61). This sense of potential does not diminish as the boy grows older. Since, as Lynn Segal points out, "masculinity condenses a certain engagement with power, however unrealized" (Segal 2001, 239), the ideal of Superman remains in the dreams still to be realized even in adult life. As Brown puts it, "A superman exists inside every man" (2001, 168).

This idea that, as Mark Waid puts it, if others "could see behind our glasses, they'd see a Superman" (2004, 297) draws attention to another key element in comic book mythology and masculinity—the double identity, which comprises a plain-clothed mundane identity, like Clark Kent, and a costumed heroic identity, like Superman. The costume is integral to the world of comic book heroes and is generally explained, like Superman's S, as a "symbol of hope" (Byrne 2003, 39), or else as a disguise, a way to engineer a secret identity.

Explaining the need for a double identity, Byrne's Clark observes that his first public appearance as Superman created an overwhelming demand for his help, and yet, "Obviously I can't be 'on call' twenty-four hours a day" (Byrne 2003). The costume, therefore, allows the hero a private life because removing the uniform means going off public duty. When they do intend their services to be available, the "costume and logo constitute the superhero body as publicly marked" (Bukatman 2003, 54), meaning that, in a very literal way, the heroic identity is fabricated by the costume. If clothes make the man, the costume can make him "super," "spider," or "bat," as if the public identity has access to gifts, talents, abilities, or powers that are not at home in the normal description of "man."

The Costumed Male in Public

The costumed identity, therefore, relates both to adolescent and adult identities and to private and public identities. More than this, however, it allows a structuring of these identities in relation to each other, with the private linked to the adolescent and the public to the adult. In other words, the private world does not simply represent time off at home for the hero, but also the boyhood that the teenager must leave behind. Assuming a costumed identity signifies a move into the public realm, entering the workplace and earning a wage, and thus taking on adult responsibilities. As Peter Parker puts it, "I'm Spider-Man, given a job to do," in Spider-Man 2 (2004). The comic
book hero’s costume, therefore, constructs him as a man exactly because it marks him as a public figure. In this way, comics suggest that strength in the masculine public sphere is the true sign of manhood. This model is evidenced in Superman’s very first adventure, where he braces locked doors, steel doors, and bullets to save an innocent woman from execution. His manliness, however, is asserted not in storming the penitentiary, but in gaining access to the governor who can pardon her, so that Superman becomes a “man” once his value is recognized by those with a legitimate claim to authority. The public identity created by the costume makes a man “super,” or really a man, because it places him within a male-centered system of public power acknowledgement. In other words, no man can be a hero at home, because his costume means nothing there.

The costume, in effect, announces the man’s accession to a position of privileged entitlement, where he embodies a patriarchal masculinity. In the series *Y: The Last Man* (2002–2008), for example, the costumes worn by Yorick Brown, sole survivor of a plague that killed every male on the planet, establish his membership in various patriarchal systems of power and control. His gas mask represents military force; his beard, physical might; his vestments and a burqa, religious control; a basketball team’s mascot’s costume (“an anthropomorphic ball” [27.5]), the sporting industry; a box, industrial systems; and a mask and cloak, superheroism. As Lyndsay Brown comments, “No sooner does Yorick disguise himself ... but his masculinity is discovered” (2007, np). The manly acts of heroism that Yorick misguided performs, however, are undercut by his female protector who, seeing him for what he is (just a “good boy” [15.20], an “infantile citizen” [Brown 2007], an immature student of pop culture and unemployed English major), sarcastically remarks, “You’re a regular man of steel, all right” (11.5). In this female world, Yorick will become a man not through acts of strength but by attaining self-knowledge and emotional maturity.

**Feminine Powerlessness**

The tensions between normal “male” and heroic “masculine” identities in the above discussion illuminate the limited means by which “manhood” can be defined for comic book heroes.9 Bukatman’s comment that the costume shifts the male “from the field of maternal power to the realm of the patriarchy” (2003, 55) reveals the way in which masculinity is defined in contradistinction with femininity (see also Brown 2001, 168). As a result, the only available masculine identity is the heroic identity, and all other male roles become feminized (see Easthope in Brown 2001). When Superman, for example, responds to a “wife-beating” (Siegel and Shuster 1938), the wife appears in the first panel only, lying on the floor with her face buried in her arms, and is not the model for feminization in the sequence. That role falls to the husband, whom Superman hurls into a wall, shouting, “You’re not fighting a woman, now!” (5). Superman’s greatest victory here is in seeing the violent husband faint in terror, revealing that this false man, too cowardly to gain the respect of his peers, is as weak as those he would control by force. The unconscious husband’s prone position visually reflects his wife’s in the earlier panel. Superman’s costume therefore works within what Segal calls “hegemonic masculinity” as one of those “images of power and control over anything indicative of weakness, failure, effeminacy — whether in women, other men or, importantly, in repudiated aspects of oneself?” (Segal 2001, 239).

A later incident in the same issue illustrates how the hollowness of female power affects a woman’s relationship with the superhero. Grudgingly attending a dance with Clark Kent, Lois Lane has to fend off the advances of an unwanted suitor because her escort “reluctantly adheres ... to his role of a weakling” (Siegel and Shuster 1938, 7), but she pays for her show of spirit when the spurned “hoodlum” abducts her in his car.10 Clark, denounced by Lois as “a spineless, unbearable coward,” becomes Superman, rushing to her rescue and shaking the occupants, including Lois, out of the vehicle (Siegel and Shuster 1938, 7). The image of Superman then smashing the car against some rocks provides the iconic cover to *Action #1*. Indeed, this assertion of power over the men who had previously humiliated him takes precedence over consideration of the woman in front of whom he had been humiliated. Though Rob Lendrum (2005) argues that Clark “is symbolically castrated by the scolding Lois whenever he backs down in a fight” (362), Clark can afford to lose face in front of Lois because Superman always gains the upper hand over her male aggressors, and as a woman Lois does not rank in the hierarchy of male power. Anyway, a woman’s affections serve only as evidence of power conferred by patriarchal authority. Indeed, once power is achieved, the love of the woman follows. As Pecora (1992) remarks of Superman, “It has been clear to the reader that Lois Lane is his, if only he would ask” (63). Similarly, when Yorick Brown is reunited with his girlfriend, he learns that, although she was about to break up with him when the plague hit, she would marry him now because of his heroic identity, “courageous and strong” (57.17). He is a fantasy made flesh.

**The Naked Hero**

The flesh of the superhero is undeniably fantastic. The comic book hero, masked and costumed, clothed from head to toe, nevertheless remains, to all
intents and purposes, visually naked; “The bodies are essentially presented as nudes (costumes are more coloration than cover-up)” (Bukatman 2003, 59). The skintight costume declares a sense of invulnerability, the skin the only protection required in the heat of battle, and maleness thus marked by an impenetrable rigidity. Richard Dyer (1997) speaks of comic book heroes in terms of “bodybuilt bodies,” “hard and contoured, often resembling armour” (263, 265), and evokes the classic image of the hero seen against the skyline, with hands on hips and legs planted (see Figure 2). In flight, the hard edge of the hero’s form is even more purely defined, more fully self-contained.

These representations of heroes are often related (see Brown 2001, Bukatman 2003, Dyer 1997) to Klaus Theweleit’s accounts of the soldier male: “The man the soldier wished and was expected to be” (1989, 206). Theweleit’s work on the German Freikorps identifies a masculine self defined by its buttressing against the polluting flood which would break through the shell of the self, whether that be the flow of the masses, of racial impurity, or of femininity. The unbroken silhouette of the hero, its “unity” and “totality” (Theweleit 1989, 98, 162), seems the perfect image for this male identity because, as Dyer comments, “a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies” (2002, 265). Also, though the soldier’s body is oddly contradictory (he is “not only naked, but stripped of skin; he seems to lose his body armor, so that everything enters directly into the interior of his body, or flows directly from it.... But at the same time, he is all armor” (Theweleit 1989, 192)), these contradictions are also present in the superhero, who is “both armoured and flowing in combat” (Bukatman 2003, 58), the hard surface of his body releasing strange and violent energies, such as Superman’s heat vision. It is not surprising, therefore, that Theweleit’s discussion of the soldier male as “man of steel” (1989, 160) is illustrated by images of Spider-Man (160, 161), Captain America (178), and Thor (181, 370).

These forms of hard masculinity are described as “hypermasculine” (Brown 2001; Bukatman 2003; Lendrum 2005; MacKinnon 1997). Bukatman observes that “In colored skintight hoods, these heroes really become enormous dicks sheathed in an array of distinctly baroque (and somewhat painful looking) condoms” (2003, 61). These sexualized visions, however, merely reflect the implied sexual opportunity and potency enjoyed by the hero. While some superheroes have a recognizable sex life, others, like Theweleit’s soldier male, displace these urges so that “Heroic acts of killing take the place of the sexual act” (1989, 279). Either way, this sex rarely takes places within the marital bed; there is instead, and in some cases literally, a “flight from commitment” which includes an excision of the domestic (Ehrenrich in Morgan 2001, 228). Existing as public figures only, “Most of these heroes seem not to have secret identities at all” (Bukatman 2003, 55).

Superhero and Husband

The hypermasculine comic book superhero represents an ideal for men “constrained by the force of, and their fantasy relation to, a dominant or hegemonic ideal of masculinity as tough, heterosexual, authoritative, successful” (Segal 2001, 239). The unreality of, and strain within, the representation is obvious when there is an attempt to reintroduce this public identity to anything resembling a private life. When Lois Lane dates Superman, or when the hero marries, this strain is especially evident because, as Margaret Mead comments, “Retreat to phallic athleticism may be an alternative to acceptance of unending domesticity — neither of which is representative of full male potentialities” (1962, 23). The wonderfully weird Marvel Weddings (Lee 2005) features the marriage of Reed Richards/Mister Fantastic and Susan Storm/Invisible Woman, the latter, significantly, appearing in nine panels of
the story compared to the twenty-five of her husband-to-be. The story serves
to assert his masculine authority as she takes on a subordinate role. She ques-
tions, “Reed, what does it mean?” (12), “Oh, Reed! What will we do?” (15),
and expresses misgivings over their future life together, “Oh, Reed—it’s like
an evil omen warning us of—our wedding” (14), leaving Reed to find the
answers. Reed’s journeying through the fourth dimension while Susan stays
with the bridal party simply foreshadows a future where he will be as invis-
ible in her world as she already is in his.

The most remarkable event in Marvel Weddings is the wedding of Janet
Van Dyne/The Wasp to Yellowjacket, the mystery man who claims to have
ekilled her boyfriend, Hank Pym/Goliath, but who is himself that amnesiac
boyfriend. Hank’s dilemma—“How,” as he says, “I want to marry Jan ... be
more the kind of man she wants... But I can’t ... not while there are still so
many secrets to unlock ... so much that man does not know...!” (Lee 2005,
38)—exemplifies the disjunction between the public man that the hero is
confident he should be, and the family man that those who love him want
him to be. Hank’s extreme, and unconsciously formed, solution seems to sug-
gest that, for a hero truly to commit to a home life, he must forget who he
“really” is.12

Domesticity can also be achieved if the hero is rendered powerless, and
so is split from his potential self. In Marvel Weddings, Bruce Banner marries
Betty Ross only because he is no longer the Hulk. In the most famous DC
universe wedding, Clark Kent finally marries Lois Lane because he no longer
has his superpowers; and in the films Superman II and Spider-Man 2, Clark
and Peter Parker can see themselves only with Lois Clark and Mary Jane Wat-
son respectively when they are heroes no more. A private life is seen as a com-
promise or promise for the man who has failed, who is without recognized power (literally impotent), and who can only now settle, in every
sense of the word, without sacrificing a single life of sexually charged super-
heroism.

Fluid and Female

The extremes of the hypermasculine superhero are criticized by commen-
tators such as Brown (2001), who argues that these models of masculinity are
intent on “erasing the ordinary man underneath in favour of an even more
excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal” (168). He praises
instead alternative “models which stress holism rather than the one-dimen-
sional hypermasculinity” (2), and explains the appeal to fans of “new heroes”
(1) described as “tough, but not too tough” (198). Segal (2001), too, finds that
recent studies on the ways in which young men construct a sense of identity
note their “distance from notions of heroic masculinity: about which they
were ironic; playful; detached” (340). These young men also aim to be “tough
(but not too tough); cool (but not stupid); good at sport; not a swot; not
gay; not soft.” But Segal argues that, though this is not a one-dimensional
model of masculinity, it is hardly multidimensional either, and it still “huge-
narrows the range of permissible boys’ behaviours” (340). Brown (2001), nevertheless, believes that the hypermasculine superhero
at least is an aberration, because “comic book masculinity is ultimately
based on the inclusion of the devalued” (175). He argues that Clark
Kent and Peter Parker are not erased by Superman and Spider-Man respec-
tively but remain “a part of the character that is essential to their identities
as a whole” (175). Yet, when Clark, in iconic fashion, rips open his shirt to
reveal the S of Superman, this seems to illustrate only the limited shift from
“not too tough” to “tough.” Peter/Spider-Man is different. Peter, in the Spi-
er-Man (2002) film, also rips open his shirt, baring the spider emblem under-
neath, but Spider-Man’s costume is then later torn in battle to reveal a
bloodied Peter underneath, displaying the permeability of his identity and
the layering of its various facets. In the climax to Spider-Man, Norman
Osborn/Green Goblin relates to Peter, his face bisected by his damaged mask,
as a father to a son, while in Spider-Man 2 it is the unmasked Peter who saves
the day by appealing to Otto Octavius/Doctor Octopus’s sense of intellec-
tual responsibility as a fellow scientist. For such reasons, the images of
Spider-Man seem misplaced in Theweleit’s discussion of the armored body, for
the wise-cracking, web-slinging, friendly neighborhood Spider-Man is fluid
in mind, motion, and identity.

Spider-Man, therefore, embodies issues addressed also in the work of
Grant Morrison (1993), who, as he says, attempts to make “Superman fluid
and female” and explores “the idea of diffusing the hard body” (np). Such
concerns appear in his Book Patrol series, Flex Mentallo, and Animal Man,
in which, importantly, Buddy Baker/Animal Man has a wife, Ellen, and chil-
dren, Cliff and Maxine. Buddy’s brand of domesticated heroism is signaled
by the way he accessorizes his costume with a sensible jacket, explaining
that “It’s kind of embarrassing wearing a skin-tight costume... I think the jacket
looks pretty neat and it gives me somewhere to keep money and stuff” (Mor-
rison 1991, 1.19). In this way he softens the hard lines of his heroic profile.

The groundbreaking results of Morrison’s revival in Animal Man of a
second-tier 1960s character are matched by Peter Milligan’s equally progres-
sive reworking of a Steve Ditko series from the 1970s, Shade, the Changing
Man.13 In the original, security agent Rac Shade, who’s “from a different
planet, but on the inside he’s just another man” (Milligan 1990, 16.6), wears
a powerful harness which projects a force field giving him an ever-changing surface appearance. Still man enough to receive admiring glances from women on the street, Shade's strength lies not in the impenetrability of his force field (which becomes a liability when he is almost cooked within it) but in its flexible expressiveness, reflecting the multiple aspects of his own identity. For example, Shade is described by the character Mellu as "Shade—my teacher, my partner, and my ex-fiancé! That traitor" (I.4). Milligan expands further on the concept so that, where Ditko's Shade changes according to the perceptions of others, Milligan's Shade changes himself. He changes his hair, his clothes, and his environment, duplicates himself, becomes Hades and then Shade the changing woman, or a lampshade, a blanket, and various other objects. He is dead and then alive again.

The Secret Inadequacy

Shade explodes the monolithic heroic identity, but, as Spider-Man shows, even within the confines of the traditional double identity it is possible to complicate the heroic image. Busiek, for example, notes that Superman: Secret Identity "takes the concept of the secret identity and uses it as a metaphor for our own inner selves" (2004, iii). Here, the other identity is not the public superhero but the private self, or the "part we think of as ’me’" (Busiek 2004, 205), often also the potential self that the man hopes is the better part of who he is. Sharing this with others requires a different kind of bravery because it means replacing the armored shell with a naked emotional vulnerability. A man, therefore, might even choose to sacrifice a relationship rather than risk having his secret self declared inadequate. Perhaps understandably then, when, in 1990, Superman proposed to Lois Lane and she accepted, he questioned whether or not he should reveal his concealed identity to her, because he knew the Lois who loved Superman might not necessarily care in the same way for Clark Kent.

Rather than coming to terms with this risk of rejection, this "risk of falling short of being a man" (Connor 2001, 211), superheroes use anxiety over the possible dangers to those who get too close to them to defend the strategy of masking their identity. As Peter Parker argues in Spider-Man 2, "Now you know why I can’t be with you. If my enemies found out about you, if you got hurt I could never forgive myself." Parker wishes he could tell Mary Jane about his feelings, despite the fact that, in the chain of secrecy, it is the link between the hero and his enemies, rather than between the hero and those he cares for, that guarantees the safety of those he loves. This expressed desire to protect seemingly contradicts the examples of heroes who enter relationships when they lose their powers. However, when an impotent man enters a relationship, his excuses for failure are already made. If a powerful man takes the risk of revealing his true self and is humiliated he has nowhere left to hide. Superman may be infallible, but, once his whole identity is known, if "failure-prone" Clark Kent (Brown 2001, 174) disappoints the woman he loves, his shortcomings in his private life can no longer be compensated for in a secret world of heroic achievement.

All "boys know that they will fall short of the ideals themselves" (Segal 2001, 340), but these fears of inadequacy are often based on very traditional "notions of the breadwinner, the assumption of mature adult responsibilities in terms of a wife and children, the settling-down into respectability, duty and security" (Morgan 2001, 226). In Marvels, for example, photographer Phil Sheldon, intimidated by the emergence of super-powered beings, breaks off his engagement with his girlfriend, saying, "A man’s got to be able to protect his family" (Busiek 1994, 1.23). Sheldon voices an ideal of masculine power that, Segal argues, "Men will fail, and fail again, to measure up to" (239). These standards, however, are not necessarily applied by the women in these men’s lives. Sheldon’s girlfriend protests, “I don’t want a superman, darling” (Busiek 1994,1.23), and when Buddy Baker faints in his future wife’s arms as he asks her to marry him, she looks down with fond irony on her “brave hero” (Morrison 2002, 14, 22). Perhaps no man can be a hero for the one he loves, and yet every man is a hero to the one who loves him.

Domesticated Animal Man

Although Animal Man remains one of the few comic series whose hero is a family man, Buddy Baker’s domesticated heroism also conforms to conventional models of heroic masculinity. His heroic identity is equated with an adult life of achieved potential, as Buddy claims that “I’m serious about getting my act together this time. I’m nearly thirty, you know? And like, when I was a kid I just automatically assumed I was going to be somebody” (Morrison 1991, 1.6). Buddy has a double, but not secret, identity, underlining the fact that he views superheroing as a job, with his costume advertising his public service. Like any working man, however, he faces familial criticism. Wife Ellen complains, “I don’t know what makes you think you’re a super-hero! You paid 800 dollars for those Animal Man costumes and they’ve only been out of the closet a half-dozen times” (Morrison 1991, 1.7). Even when Buddy is invited to join the Justice League, he is not spared feelings of inadequacy, as son Cliff complains, “Why don’t you get yourself some real powers, Dad?” (Morrison 1991, 9.23).
The determined masculinity of Buddy Baker’s public life is continually undercut by elements in his domestic world, like Ellen’s T-shirt reading “World’s Greatest Mom” functioning like Buddy’s A for Animal Man, and her refusal to defer to the superhero. As Buddy notes, “You can’t just invite Superman back for dinner!” (Morrison 1991, 2.14). Buddy’s home life remains mundane in a way that contrasts with the domestic ideal imagined by the orphaned hero and tempers the extremes of the heroic identity. Buddy argues, “Just because I wear a costume doesn’t mean I always have to be right!” (Morrison 2002, 219). For this house-trained hero, being a man is an engagement in a process of negotiation between selves: the self he seems to be, the self he wishes to be, and the self he feels he is. In the end, happiness is being able to say, “Everything’s working out” (Morrison 2002, 198).

However, for any superhero, the idea of home also signifies the location of weakness. When Animal Man is attacked in his own home, scorched carpets, blasted banisters, and a swollen lip for Ellen are blamed on Buddy’s lack of a secret identity. Although Ellen contends that “Buddy has enough trouble dealing with the identity he’s got!” (Morrison 1991, 9.12), the fact remains that the hero’s lyca costume, which affords no physical protection, can shield his family, his true vulnerability. As Arthur Light/Doctor Light observes after raping Sue Dibny, the wife of Ralph/Elongated Man, “It’s your weakness, isn’t it?” (Meltzer 2005, 2.10). Surveying the heroes who came too late to stop him, he identifies the public mark of a private life, observing, “I see a wedding ring bulging under that costume.... You got someone at home?” (Meltzer 2005, 2.15).

In place of secrecy, Buddy Baker asks the Justice League to install “standard super-hero home safety” features to guard his home (Morrison 1991, 9.12). However, the systems intended to defend against hostile attack replicate the threat of violence, and when Cliff inadvertently triggers the alarms, he is held in the sights of laser weapons. As the workmen installing the system observe, “It’s a little bit dangerous for a super-hero to have a family” (Morrison 1991, 9.12). What is most disturbing is the way in which this misfiring technology reflects on the hero himself. If the protective technology is a natural supplement to the hero’s strength, it also reveals how the home is endangered by the hero’s violent power (see Figure 4). Man’s secret is that he is “ashamed most of all of the violence that is inseparable from being a man” (Connor 2001, 213). Keeping his secret, he comes to resent his family, he imagines infidelities, and he feels he cannot be himself at home. Yet, he resents them only because they are his greatest weakness, and, inevitably, he will fail to protect them from himself. The truth is that a man who fears his secret self fights not on the side of good but of evil.

**Violence and the Masculinity Crisis**

The comic book superhero, so easily associated with the soldier male, complicates the perception of violence and masculinity. The Peter Parker who wakes to the sound of his alarm clock and, reflexively striking out, smashes it (Stern 1981, 2), is also the Spider-Man who “can always think clearer when I’m web-swingin’ round town” (Lee 2004, 7). Spider-Man takes pleasure in the powerful body in action, much like Superman in flight, Daredevil’s acrobatics, Batman’s physicality, the athleticism of Captain America, and the Hulk’s leaps across the desert. These positively portrayed physical acts can connect usefully with the self-conscious, growing teenager, but their affirmative effect is undermined by their being associated with, or even perceived as, acts of violence. Indeed, pleasure derived from powerful physicality, even in sports, is often equated directly with the experience of violent power, as when James McBride asserts, “Whether in the context of war, sports or battered, violence is something many men — even ostensibly educated, well-adjusted men — enjoy” (1995, 4). Male confusion over what can and cannot be enjoyed reflects men’s own distrust of themselves as the ‘aggressive’ partner (Theweleit 1989, 269), and their fear that all they have to offer the ones they love is violence. This fear is evident too in superhero narratives.

Milligan’s Shade (1990–1996) describes the “too sensitive” (4.1) Shade, “the dreamer... the romantic poet” (15.6), “the pretty boy” (20.3) whose “womanliness” (20.4) seems to have fulfilled Theweleit’s hope (following Luce Irigaray) that men “dismantle the ‘form’ they have always wished to be, to make
fluid its contours, to take pleasure in contradictions (death to logical consistency), openness, powerlessness (no longer to live as killers)” (1989, 107). But, on Earth, Shade must inhabit the body of a murderer, who will use his power to kill again and to have sex with Shade's girlfriend Kathy. This scenario enacts “the male nightmare—that his sexuality is a raving monster, that will savage and terrorize women” (Horrocks 1994, 146). Confronted by his internal murderer, who coaxes, “Let’s take her together.... Everyman’s got to admit he’d like to really” (Milligan 1990, 12.1). Shade asks himself if this is what men (and women) really want. Kathy, defying expectations, says, “I didn’t think it’d be so good.... I guess you always seemed a little... a little scared and timid” (12.11). Shade is the one too delicate for this world.

After his death and rebirth, Shade ejaculates onto the earth in apparent communion with nature, but this is actually the “soldier’s... desire to fuck the earth, ... to rid himself and the earth of all those maternal qualities of warmth and sensuality” (Benjamin and Rabinbach xxi–xxii). Indeed, the new Shade loses “a part of [his] soul” (Milligan, 34.10) to become more masculine through a process of self-mutilation that leaves him less alive but more male. In fact, masculinity is defined by that act of violent self-harm. As Segal argues, “No one can be ‘that male’ without constantly doing violence to many of the most basic human attributes: the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness, the pleasures of passivity—all, of course, quintessentially ‘feminine’” (1990, 114). Violence against women thus mirrors the internal violence against the essentially feminine that is the making of the man. “Man is forever at war,” says Segal (1990, 104), and must therefore be removed from the familial world he would protect. Otherwise, a hero’s story can only end with death. This is why Shade’s Kathy is killed, and Buddy Baker’s Ellen, Cliff, and Maxine murdered.

Animal Man's series was ultimately cancelled, suggesting that there is no place in comics yet for a domesticated hero. Indeed, Ditko’s Shade series was never completed, and Milligan’s Shade travels back in time to undo his own story. Meanwhile, Peter Parker’s marriage to Mary Jane Watson has not only ended but has been magically undone. Comic book masculinity is in crisis but, as Steve Connor puts it, “The crisis of masculinity is what masculinity has always been” (2001, 224). In fact, comics thrive on crisis, in continuity-altering series like Crisis on Infinite Earths, Zero Hour: Crisis in Time, Identity Crisis, Infinite Crisis, and Final Crisis, which leave any character’s story undecided. Even cancellation, therefore, cannot change that Spider-Man was married, Shade reunited with Kathy, and Buddy’s family returned to him alive. Given enough crises, the stories hint that these heroes might eventually lose the costumes, be at peace with themselves, and feel like real men, with nothing other than shame. If “shame can be altered or transcended only in so far as there is some change in the whole self” (Lynd in Connor 2001, 219), if shame “is a skin thing,” “an appalling sense of weightlessness,” “has a crudely and traditionally heroic aspect,” and if “one flies from shame into glory” (Connor 2001, 220, 224, 227), then perhaps Clark Kent, changed into Superman, flying against the sky, bearing a scarlet S as the mark of his shame, can make the world a better place for humankind.

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Notes
1. From the thousands of characters created by DC Comics and Marvel Comics, 37 married couples were noted. Eleven couples remained married, 2 married under false pretenses, 9 separated or divorced, and 15 were parted by death.
2. Perhaps Superman’s current relative unpopularity is partly explained by his story being “ended.” Joe Quesada, editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, long viewed the 1987 marriage of Peter Parker/Spider-Man to Mary Jane Watson as a “strategic mistake,” because as “a property that is attractive to teens, having him married matures him too much” (Quesada np).
3. Siegel and Shuster were both nineteen years old when they first conceived of Superman. Jim Shooter was in his early teens when he wrote the stories of the Legion of Super-Heroes published in Adventure Comics in 1966.
4. Bukatman notes “as obvious an allegory of pubescent metamorphosis as one could imagine: The Hulk, for example, got big and hairy and his voice change” (54).
5. Amy Kiste Nyberg (1995) shows that the “average comic book reader is a 20-year-old male; in fact, 95 percent of comic book readership is male” (205). See also Norma Pecora (2001, 60).
6. The common temptation to assign "true" and "false" identities, where Spider-Man, for example, is "really" Peter Parker, obscures the fact that the link between the two identities is the true secret. The lure of assigning a "real" identity is so strong that rethinking the two identities has always been a means of reinterpreting comic book characters. However, ultimately the fluidity of these identities is more significant than any assertion that "Superman's the real guy. Clark's the disguise." (Waid 2004, 296).

7. Where necessary, comic book references give issue as well as page number.

8. Unusually.

9. See Segal for the historical context to the constructed "gulf between the private 'feminine' sphere of the household and the public 'masculine' world of the market" (1990, 105).

10. Pecora observes that the women in Superman's life "were punished for qualities usually expected in men (zealoussness and aggressiveness in the workplace") (2001, 70).

11. Superman the Man of Steel, Iron Man, and Batman the Dark Knight are also clearly identified with the armored body.

12. More recently, an unhinged Matt Murdock/Daredevil marries Milla Donovan, apparently as a result of a "nervous breakdown" (Bendis 2004, 60:20); Luke Cage/Power Man suspects his wife, Jessica Jones/Jewel, of being a shape-shifting alien; and Dinah Lance/Black Canary appears to kill her husband Oliver Queen/Green Arrow (actually another shape-shifting villain) when he attacks her on their wedding night.

13. Doe m Patrol, Animal Man, and Shade would all eventually appear under the DC Comics imprint Vertigo, launched in 1993 to publish comics 'suggested for mature readers.'

14. In the same way, Milligan's Shade touches on themes such as the loss of the original family ("I was brought up by professional parents."). My biological mother and father were brought up by professional parents. My biological mother and father..."

15. Nyberg (1995) reports that "women characters are either victims or, if they have special powers, are unable to handle them; or women are tormented characters because of the powers they possess" (208).

16. Attacks on the home here equal attacks on women. When, in Green Lantern #54 (1994), Alexandra DeWitt is killed, dismembered, and her body placed in her boyfriend's fridge, the incident drove Gail Simone to create the list Women in Refrigerators, detailing the many female characters in comic books who had been "killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-delirating tragedies befall her" ("Character List" 2006, np) often "with a vague sexual component" (Simone 2007, np).

17. Theeweleit discusses the soldier male in terms of "the mechanized body" (1989, 162).

18. Disturbingly, DeWitt writes that, during sex, "Superman would literally crush LL's body in his arms, while simultaneously ripping her open from crotch to sternum, gutting her like a trout" (1994, np). Gavin C. Schmitt notes that "because Superman is extraordinarily strong, so must his Orgasms be unusually powerful, causing him to ejaculate semen with such force as to be the equivalent of being shot by a shotgun or other high-powered firearm" (2006, np).

Works Cited


