
Jess Nevins. *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017. 400p.

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To be sure, Jess Nevins is not charting the evolution of superhero fashion. The book, otherwise attractively mounted and appointed, is devoid of color panels or illustrations apart from the cover. Instead, the author uses the term “Costumed Avenger” (13) as one side of a coiled helix. The other side is the “heroic mission” which necessarily “must be selfless (not performed for personal gain) and aimed at aiding the oppressed” (8). The superhero outfit or look is really a kind of foil to the heroic mission and reducible to “a full-fledged ‘pervert suit’ costume” (8). So indelible is this combination of suit and mission that we forget how much the outfit is the vestige of a disguise to elude capture. Nevins alerts us to Victorian heroes like Spring-Heeled Jack, a real-life London alley-way predator, whose story, in the hands of “penny dreadful hack” Alfred Coates, evolves into a masked and cloaked villain who performs the role of “Good Samaritan on all sides—serving by kindness rather than killing by fear” (108). Nevins also bears down on the Nick Carter “effect,” which gave the dime-novel era a New York detective with inexplicable super strength—“he can place four packs of playing cards together, and tear them in halves between his thumbs and fingers” (138)—not to mention a trademark look: “Always the same style of suit coat and pants, always the same high-necked shirt and dark tie” (146).

A great example of the notorious side of the superhero is Nevins’s interest in the 17th century English folk hero Long Meg, who “beginning as a 16-year-old, uses her size and strength and fighting skills to fight corruption and wickedness—and, yes, crime—on behalf of the poor and oppressed” (76). Like the printed ballads, pamphlets, and books that celebrate her, Long Meg arises from political and economic upheaval in England: “she is a product of the modern world, and provided her readers and listeners with the idea that fighting evil and crime could take place in the modern world” (76). Long Meg’s most immediate legendary descendant is the Roaring Girl, Moll Cut-Purse, based on the life of Mary Frith: “Purse-snatcher at 16, second-story woman at 25, cross dresser and ‘roaring girl’ (the female version of the ‘roaring boy,’ who was known for public drinking, fighting, and petty crimes),” Moll/Mary was “part of London’s female transvestite movement,” an habitu  of the criminal underworld, and even an “inmate at

the infamous Bethlehem Hospital for the insane” (77). Nevins regards these “cross-dressing warrior women of popular ballads” as full-fledged examples of the proto-superhero who has both the look of the costumed avenger and the heroic mission: “Her relevance to this history is as a proto-superheroine, with her more-than-normal strength, code name, costume (her male’s attire), and her selfless activities” (76).

Nevins does expound on the kind of mythic heroes we associate with Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* but all to prove a point: “their models ultimately can’t be applied to modern superheroes” (4). For one thing, mythic heroes inevitably fall in the third part of their story cycle: “The same cannot be said of the modern superhero, the vast majority of whom eternally operate ... in the middle phase of their career” (4). For another, mythic heroes keep coming up short in the selfless mission department. For instance, much more than Gilgamesh, Nevins privileges the proto-superhero status of his friend (and minder) Enkidu, who “has the unusual origin story, the superpower, the extraordinary skill, the distinctive appearance (his hairiness), extraordinary skill, the finite/mortal status, and most of all the heroic mission” (19). The author also sees proto-superhero traits in King Arthur’s knights—“they are part of the lineage that began with Enkidu” (48)—and, of course, in the “Robin Hood megatext,” which foreshadows a paradox of superhero motivation in the Golden age of American comic books: “Superheroes, like Robin Hood, can rebel against individually corrupt officials, but rarely if ever do they try to change the corporate capitalistic system itself” (51). Nevins also recounts the successful lawsuit by DC Comics against an imitator of its signature hero, Superman, that in the spring of 1939 seemed to freeze and kill innovation and expansion, chronicles the stunning revival of comic books in the fall of the same year, cites impressive statistical evidence for the domination of American popular culture by comic books throughout the 1940s and into the early 1950s, explains how that domination was undermined by the notorious Comics Code in 1954, and brings to bear his own insight into the revolutionary approach of Stan Lee and Marvel Comics, which would once again give us superheroes like Spring-Heeled Jack and the “Roaring Girl” Moll Cut-purse, the type who arise from our everyday modern experience and are alienated from conventional authority. Spiderman leads this pack which ultimately brings us into the recent era of blockbuster superhero movies.