FURSCA Research Program Cover Page

Name of applicant: **Travis Trombley** Date: **Thursday, February 5th, 2013 (2.05.13)**
Graduation Year: **2014** Major: **English (for secondary education)**

Advisor: **Dr. Amity Reading** Advisor's Department: **English**

Title of Project: ***Are Superheroes a Modern Mythology? A comparison of the contemporary superhero genre to ancient Greek and medieval Arthurian mythologies***

Grant Period: [ ] Fall [ ] Spring **[X] Summer** - Summer start and end dates?

New for Summer 2013: Abstract. *Please provide a short (100 words or less) abstract that describes the work that you are proposing in layman's terms. The abstract should be understandable by a general audience.*

The proliferation of superhero narratives in western culture has led scholars like Richard Reynolds and others to label the genre a "modern mythology."[1] Upon drawing parallels between superheroes and mythological traditions of cultures past, this term seems both apt and obvious, but it has profound implications and merits critical attention. My goal for the summer is to explore the validity and the consequences of calling the superhero stories a "mythology" by systematically comparing them to two major recognized mythological traditions: Greek and Roman mythology and Arthurian mythology.

Does this project require IRB or IACUC approval? [ ] YES **[X] NO**
       If yes, has approval been granted? [ ] YES [ ] NO
Does this project require chemicals or biological agents? [ ] YES **[X] NO**
If yes, have you received approval to order these chemicals? [ ] YES [ ] NO

BUDGET SUMMARY
Amount(s) Requested For each line requested, briefly explain the purpose

$142.95 Detailed information on readings will be listed on page five.

DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. Print. **$45.00**
Johnson, Jeffrey K. *Super-history: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Print. **$40.00**
Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. New York: Continuum, 2002. Print. $**32.95**
Lacy, Norris, and James Wilhelm, eds. *The Romance of Arthur: Medieval Texts in Translation*. 3E. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print. $49.95
Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: a Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1992. Print. **$25.00**

Total: $142.95

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[1] Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: a Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1992, Print.

Are Superheroes a Modern Mythology? A comparison of the contemporary superhero genre to medieval

Arthurian mythologies

Though it began as cheap, colorful, childish escapism, the superhero genre has evolved over its 75-year-long career into a wide-spread phenomenon of entertainment. Acknowledging the genre's brief existence and dubious origins, author Richard Reynolds writes:

> For the cultural student, superhero comics present a number of immediate paradoxes: a popular art-form traditionally known for its apparently hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts; a publishing genre which began to gain a degree of cultural respectability by ducking 'underground' at least partially for its distribution; an art-form which has been handled (if at all) with disdain by the literary establishment, and, yet has built up its own lively and heuristic critical discourse through what is still rather misleadingly known as the 'fan' pres; and, finally , a body of contemporary mythology. (Reynolds 7)

This is the beginning of Reynolds's argument that superheroes have become a "modern mythology." Indeed, the superhero genre shares a number of commonalities with older mythological traditions: the same characters are used repeatedly by various authors over an extended period of time, the individual stories often fit within a larger recognized universe, they reflect the political and social climate of their time, and they communicate certain moral principals or moral dangers pertaining to their respective cultures. But are these commonalities alone enough to warrant labeling the superhero genre a mythology, or are they simply superficial coincidences? Why not label these narratives folk tales or legends instead? What even constitutes a "mythology" in the cultural-theoretical sense of the word?

My project aims to compare the modern superhero mythos and Arthurian mythology, another famous western tradition, in an attempt to test some of the underlying assumptions in modern cultural studies of serial graphic publications. Studies like Reynolds' seem to be assuming that comics do in fact represent modern myth, but without rigorously or systematically defining "mythology" as a theoretical concept or demonstrating deep ideological similarities between the functions performed by comics and their mythological "ancestors." In other words, my goal is to determine, as much as is objectively possible, whether or not superheroes may constitute a modern mythology, not to "prove" that they already do. Of course, in order to do so, I must first gain an understanding of the mythologies already recognized as such by the related fields of cultural studies, folklore, and

anthropology. To accomplish this, I will read primary texts from Arthurian mythology, paying especially close attention to the dynamics of the stories as they change over time, how they reflect the concerns of their respective societies at given historical moments , and, in some cases, how they do or do not seem to reflect dominant cultural ideologies. This will mean acknowledging the places and times at which the mythologies of the past were operating transgressively, with respect to dominant culture. I will also be reading academic texts to gain an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts in which these tests were written, who read them, how the people interacted with the texts, and what political/religious affinities the authors may have had. Lastly, I will also read scholarly works concerning the nature of mythology and the theoretical tools used to explain it.

Two such tools that I will study and learn to apply are structuralism and historical criticism. Structuralism is a branch of critical theory that examines texts and ideas as a series of oppositions (or contradictions) and resolutions within a narrative framework. Theorist Claude Levi-Strauss says that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (*Structural Anthropology* 1963). The binaries one would analyze with structuralism are certainly present in superhero stories and are often blatant: superhero vs. super villain, responsibility vs. desire, governing authority vs. moral authority, etc. However, so as to not simplify these stories by reading them only as dichotomies, I will also consider historical criticism in my interpretations, which seeks to interpret texts within the contexts of the times they were written. Superhero stories can also be productively read through the lens of historical criticism. With an established 75 years of production, superhero stories can be used to chart the historical events and cultural (ideological) shifts in western culture.

Once I have successfully gained a general, working understanding of the two traditions (Arthurian romance and modern comic) and what it means to treat a tradition as a mythology from a critical perspective, I will examine mainstream superheroes, in all of the various mediums in which they appear, to determine the implications of treating these stories as a mythology.

To narrow this project's considerable scope, I have chosen to focus my studies on Arthurian mythologies to provide enough sampling for comparative perspective, but with a reasonably limited reading load. While numerous mythologies exist worldwide, the Arthurian tradition is makes an ideal as a sample for this project because of its prominence in western civilization and the similarities that exist between it and the superhero genre. . Whereas other traditions like Greek and Norse mythology were established and practiced religions, Arthurian mythology was largely a literary phenomenon for the aristocracy of Medieval England and France. While occasional examination

of these other mythologies may prove beneficial at times, I believe the Arthurian tradition, since it only incorporates religion rather than acts as religion, will act as a sufficient foundation from which to learn about the workings of mythology as it may pertain to superheroes. By analyzing Arthurian mythology using the above-described critical methods, I hope to establish a set of criteria by which I can evaluate the "mythological" status of the superhero genre.

Mythology reflects, but also *informs,* cultural practice. In the medieval tradition, the aristocracy read/heard romances because it was entertainment, but the stories also strongly reinforced cultural ideals, gender-specific behavior, and social hierarchies. A young boy hearing the stories of Arthur and his court was supposed to learn from those stories the rules of chivalry—and why it was important to be chivalrous. If comics have moved from mere entertainment to the realm of myth and are playing the same role in our modern society, then they're having a larger impact on present-day social identity construction than we know.

REFERENCES

1. Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: a Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1992, Print.
2. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology.* New York: Basic, 1963. Print.

Budget:
My proposed budget of $142.95 will cover the costs of the scholarly texts related to superheroes required for the project. All other texts are available through the Albion College Library or Mel Cat.

Time Line
Week 1: I will read texts concerning the nature of mythology such as Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* in order to gain a working knowledge of what constitutes a mythology. I will also read about the critical methods I will apply to these mythological texts. When I get into the primary texts, I will be able to focus on those elements most pertinent to the project. I will also begin applying these methods to superhero comics like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and writing about my findings.

Week 2: I will begin reading primary texts from the Arthurian tradition and scholarly texts concerning the nature of that tradition. I will begin with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I will also begin writing about similarities I note between these stories and superhero comics.

Week 3: I will continue reading primary Arthurian texts like Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and writing about similarities found between the Arthurian tradition and superheroes. I will also read scholarly texts concerning the nature of Arthurian mythology like Lucy Allen Paton's *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*. By the end of the week, I hope to begin formulating a thesis with Dr. Amity Reading and engaging in significant prewriting for the final paper.

Week 4: I will read scholarly texts concerning the superhero genre, such as Geoff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why,* Marc DiPaolo's. *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, and Jeffrey K. Johnson's *Super-history: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present*.

Week 5: I will begin to summarize my finding and begin work on a final paper while continuing to read primary superhero texts and analytical, scholarly texts concerning the genre.

Week 6: I will revise my paper with the assistance of my adviser, Dr. Amity Reading,

Week 7: I will finalize my paper with the assistance of Dr. Amity Reading.

Bibliography

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Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Bill D. Moyers. New York: Doubleday, 1988. Print.

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Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: a Modern Mythology*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1992, Print.

The Norton anthology of English Literature. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. 8th ed, Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.

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Van, Lente Fred., and Ryan Dunlavey. *The Comic Book History of Comics*. San Diego, CA: IDW, 2012. Print.

Weigel, James. *Mythology; including Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Greek, Roman, and Norse Mythologies, Arthurian Legends, Introduction to Mythology, Narratives and Commentaries, Bibliographical Essay, Review Questions, Recommended Reading, Genealogical Tables, Comprehensive Index.* Lincoln, Neb.: Cliff's Notes, 1973. Print.