

SERIALIZED COMIC BOOK STORYTELLING AS MODERN MYTH-MAKING

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Abstract

This work sets out to investigate serialized comic book storytelling as a medium through its low-culture historical roots and the unique qualities it possesses. In doing so, it identifies the characteristics integral to the medium like decentralized narrative authority, long-running continuity, and multiformity: all of which help differentiate the serialized comic book from more conventional forms like literature or film. This work also closely analyzes one of the most popular examples of successful serialized comic book storytelling. By using *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and the body of work surrounding the Spider-Man character as a case study, those same integral characteristics of the format can be verifiably evaluated in a real-world context. Finally, this work compares the serialized comic book to Ancient Greek storytelling through myth and theater. The same multiformity and fluidity that defines comics is key to understanding mythic storytelling. By drawing that comparison, it becomes clear that serialized comic book storytelling, with all of its unique formal characteristics, bears the closest modern resemblance to a new form of mythmaking.

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Chapter 1

Any new reader approaching comic books can attest to how overwhelming they can be at first glance. Mainstream serialized comics (primarily Marvel and DC's superhero stories) revolve around upholding a longstanding continuity with characters that have existed for decades. These stories occupy a curious space in pop culture—they are often positioned as the face of low-brow culture and the emblem of sensationalistic storytelling for children everywhere. At the same time, their popularity has exploded in recent years, dominating the silver screen through box-office juggernauts like the Marvel Cinematic Universe and occupying more of the collective pop culture consciousness than ever before. A character like Spider-Man has endured as a household name since his creation in 1962, and spans almost every form of entertainment possible. Moreover, in his home format of the serialized comic book, he has remained in continuous print since his inception. Long running comic book characters span both cultural shifts and entire successions of authorship and do so with an impressive episodic longevity rivaled by few other formats.

There are certain qualities unique to comics that make the entire medium well-suited to this long-form format. They exhibit a kind of decentralized narrative authority: no single author controls the narrative, and instead a plurality of creators contributes to a single larger continuity. There are no “true” authors for a character like Spider-Man in the same way that there is one true author for Sherlock Holmes. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle died, ‘true’ Sherlock Holmes stories died with him, with subsequent stories understood to be adaptations, or at least posthumous third-party additions to an accepted canon. When Stan Lee stopped writing Spider-Man, the next writer, Gerry Conway, took over almost seamlessly, with no degree of separation between the two in continuity. Every story (unless stated otherwise) bears the same canonical weight,

decentralizing the narrative authority and giving a comic book character like Spider-Man the potential to continue forever in a way that a literary series cannot replicate. Incredibly long-running continuity forms from this combined and serialized storytelling, and comics can draw on this continuity as foundation for subsequent storytelling, or even manipulate and change it retroactively to better suit what current stories want to achieve.

In this thesis, I will explore qualities like this: qualities intrinsic to the medium that fundamentally differentiate the medium from other conventional formats such as the novel. These qualities stem from a variety of factors, including the comic book's roots as a low-art, commercial enterprise and its aggressively serialized nature. With the help of texts like David Hajdu's *The Ten Cent Plague* (a historical account of the comic book's roots in American culture) and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (a historical fiction rooted in the very real genesis of the American comic book), I will also explore the comic book's history with an eye to how that history influences the comic book as a medium. In addition, I will examine the comic book medium in contrast to the novel: the conventionally literary and accepted storytelling format. After establishing the comic book's unique qualities as a storytelling medium, I will explore a long-standing comic book first hand as a case study: Spider-Man, one of the most (if not *the* most) popular characters to leap off the page. By closely following a single comic book character, I will examine the properties of serialized comic book storytelling as well as their immediate effects on the narrative. This will include the medium's propensity for multiformity. In doing all this, I hope to establish and cement what makes the serialized comic book successful as an alternative narrative form and why these characters persist and even flourish through the decades within such an unassuming format. It might be simple enough to understand the comic book's *capacity* to remain in print. However, the

question then remains: Why do comic books meet (and even stretch and surpass) this capacity? What about these stories and characters cause them to not only survive but stand out from other storytelling formats to this day?

Now, many of these characters were not necessarily conceived with such grand expectations; nor was the genre. In *The Ten Cent Plague*, David Hajdu documents the comic book's roots as quite the opposite: the lowest form of art, printed for cheap and dismissed by most of adult society. The comic strip had already crept into popularity during the 1930's, and carved itself a niche as an art form that spoke to "swelling immigrant populations in New York and other cities where comics spread" and that, "unlike movements in the fine arts that crossed class lines to evoke the lives of working people... comic books were proletarian in a contained, inclusive way" (Hajdu 11). Soon comic books evolved from the comic strip, slowly emerging from primordial waters to tell stories more complex and adult than the limitations of a newspaper might allow. Landmark figures like Will Eisner and Jerry Iger pioneered these, producing comic books about noir vigilantes and swashbucklers; prototypical adventure heroes that quickly showed audiences (and, more importantly, vendors) what the medium was capable of. A newly profitable and accessible creative outlet opened new doors for creators to not only find their voices but to survive whilst doing so. Hajdu notes:

Even more so than newspaper strips before them, [comic books] attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them: immigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts, as well as some like Eisner who, in their growing regard for comic books as a form, became members of a new minority. (25-6)

Within this space for the marginalized and underrepresented, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman in 1938: an alien hero living among us that doubled as both an immigrant metaphor and the first proper superhero. Superman is the archetype and template for arguably every subsequent superhero; it is telling that Jewish co-creator and artist Shuster described the character as “the story of an unfairly denigrated person who knows that he had the ability to prevail in the end, whoever that person may be” (Hajdu 30). With this powerful open-faced representation and the spirit of bright, youthful wish fulfillment, Superman immediately captured the attention of America’s youth, inspiring a slew of costumed crimefighters in his wake. Some would fall by the wayside as imitations of the character: Amazing-Man, Master Man, and the Whip come to mind (or, more appropriately, do not). Other characters would prove Superman’s contemporaries, with the popular longevity to match his lasting presence in pop-culture.

Familiar faces like Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America were all created in that time frame before 1941 and have since endured the test of time. Eternally present and looming above all of them were sales numbers; in a commercial medium, characters live and die by commercial success. Superman and friends built their history as their serialized books continued to sell. Amazing Man and company ended their history when their books ceased to do the same. As this continuity developed, infinite space for more characters appeared, filled by the same proportion of successful and unsuccessful characters. Spider-Man hit the scene in 1962, by the time superheroes as a concept and culture were well-known. Rather than a lantern-jawed crusader against evil, Peter Parker was a teenage superhero with ordinary teenage problems—bucking that trend earned Spider-Man widespread success and the same bevy of teenage imitators and copycats. Together, the two give the reader a clear sense of the historical landscape on which modern comics are still iterated upon. The comic book icons we know today, with their

massive continuities built up over decades of continued episodic storytelling, are the surviving giants of the medium: the tallest trees that have pierced the canopy to thrive in the sun, overlooking countless contemporaries forgotten on the forest floor.

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* offers a further, personal perspective on the comic industry. If the former examines the industry with a wide-lens over a long period of time, Chabon does so with a closer and more personal eye. A far more traditionally structured piece of historical fiction, *Kavalier and Clay* follows the two titular protagonists as they invent and develop a comic book superhero during the 1940s and 1950s. Joe Kavalier is both a talented artist and Jewish refugee, and Sam Clay is a scrappy American boy with ambition and an eye for writing. Together, they navigate the uncharted waters of publishing comics: a low-art medium at first dismissed by almost everybody out of hand. The two find unlikely success, ultimately bringing a hero called the Escapist to widespread renown and shaping the modern comics landscape alongside names like Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Joe Shuster, and more.

In the same vein as Hajdu's account, Chabon's narrative explores the paradoxical dichotomy of a comic's potential for artistic expression and its low-culture roots as a relentlessly commercial product. The reader gets to see firsthand the creative spark that leads to the Escapist's creation and success. However, Sheldon Anapol—the shrewd owner of Empire Comics and boss to Kavalier and Clay—acts as a constant reminder of the Escapist's monetary worth and the comic's allegiance to that monetary worth. One of the chief conflicts surrounding the Escapist and other Empire Comics creations throughout the novel is creators Sammy and Joe's contractual obligations to Anapol and Ashkenazy. Interest in the Escapist only arises when Anapol (owner of then-titled Empire Novelty Company, Inc.) muses, “[t]hink of how much

product we could sell if we had our *own* Superman” (Chabon 84). When the pair create Miss Moth (a revolutionary heroine touched by the power of the moon), Anapol reminds them that they “have no right to any part of her”; they “came up with her as employees of Empire Comics, on [his] payroll” (282). When it comes to the Escapist, Deasey reminds them that “[a]ll the rights — radio, movies, books, tin whistles, Cracker Jack prizes— they all belong to Anapol and Ashkenazy. One hundred percent” (224). This financial, capitalistic tension is core to the duo’s comic book enterprise, and in turn to the comic book industry as a whole. As low culture (dismissed by working adults like Anapol and derided by artists like Deasey), the niche comics carve out and thrive in is commercial interest. Sammy must gain the interest of Anapol by asking him, “[how much they’re] charging [Empire] over at National for the back cover of *Action Comics* this month?” (81). As a result, the character and storytelling in their inception hinge on commercial interest. *Kavalier and Clay* offers a closer and more personal look at the commercial nature of comics already outlined above.

With this in mind, the longstanding (and often confusing) continuity of landmark characters like Superman or Spider-Man are fundamentally episodic. Each issue is an individual unit a reader purchases, meaning readers may halt their commitment to the line any time they choose. Issues must keep the reader engaged by the end of every entry in order to win a reader over into purchasing the next issue. At the same time, as standalone units each issue has a responsibility to tell some satisfying chunk of the larger story at hand. Like much of television and other episodic media, comic books must balance contributing to a larger overarching plot with maintaining a composite of smaller stories entertaining on their own individual merit.

The unique extent to which comic books are long-form and continuous complicates this further. The longest running TV show, *The Simpsons*, has run since 1989 for a staggering 662

episodes and counting. However, Spider-Man's main comic line, *Amazing Spider-Man*, alone has reached 830 issues since 1963 (discounting his inception in the discontinued pages of *Amazing Fantasy #15*) and does not accurately reflect the character's publication in both secondary lines (a la *Web of Spider-Man* or *Peter Parker: Spider-Man*) as well as ensemble books (for example, as a member of the *Avengers* or the *Fantastic Four*). Consequently, an issue of Spider-Man contributes to a single continuity magnitudes greater than any TV show.

Every issue paves new ground in the character's singular, cumulative history. Many do so inconsequentially, introducing a new villain-of-the-week for the hero to fight or telling the next chapter in a forgettable storyline. Spider-Man fans could be forgiven for not recalling his early clash with the Looter in *Amazing Spider-Man #36 (1966)*, while Batman has clashed with the Joker more times than most people care to count. However, every entry in that history also has the potential to progress it in momentous ways. Jason Todd, the second Robin and Batman's fallen sidekick, comes back to life as vigilante anti-hero Red Hood in *Under the Hood*: a year long arc that took place in 2005. In *Amazing Spider-Man #121* in 1973, Peter Parker accidentally kills Gwen Stacy trying to save her, marking a landmark moment in comics history and fueling the character with new grief for decades to come. Jason Todd still delivers brutal justice as the Red Hood today, while Gwen Stacy's death is remembered as one of the most important moments of the Spider-Man character's entire career.

Whether or not a story and its events endure as 'influential' or 'iconic', comic book continuity ensures that all of them *happened*. In any serialized comic book story, it is assumed that the hero carries with him the experiences of every event that has occurred to him in the past, however significant they might be. Moreover, anything within this lifetime is game for reference and revisitation: a long forgotten side character might reappear in a new context twenty years

later, or a previously ignored story might prove integral background information for a new one. Spider-Man's publication history records his clash with the Looter the same way it records the death of Gwen Stacy, and new stories featuring Peter Parker might refer to either of those events as they unfold.

As touched on above, Jason Todd (the second Robin) died in 1988 in the storyline "A Death in The Family," penned by Jim Starlin; originally the result of an audience vote gimmick, readers ultimately decided on the teen sidekick's death at the hands of the Joker. Almost twenty years later in 2005, writer Judd Winick would revive the character to become the Red Hood. Every event in continuity definitively happens; however, writers are free to build on these events retroactively, re-explaining how past events "actually" happened. In Robin's case, Jason Todd's body *actually* found its way to one of the mystical life-giving Lazarus Pits; in penning this, Winick redefines the character, reorienting the defining event in Jason Todd's short life as merely the beginning of a new story. Writers can and will often draw on this massive unified continuity as the foundation for new stories, rearranging previously underutilized bits and pieces until (ideally) they create a new story that readers have not seen yet. The accumulation and manipulation of this history is one of the signature aspects of comic book storytelling, and one that most clearly sets the format apart from the rest.

However, this accumulated history is also one of the most inaccessible aspects of the format. New readers find themselves thrust into fifty-plus years of content for a given character, with storylines across several periods of time shaping the character into who they are today and influencing storylines decades later. All of these different and sometimes disparate pieces come together to weave the single 'story' of a comic book universe; with the exception of the most die-hard of fans, almost every reader must begin reading this story in the middle. For more popular

characters like Batman or Spider-Man, this makes starting at a conventional beginning near impossible.

This puts the comic book format at odds with the very structure of most other storytelling mediums. Aristotle's *Poetics* (to this day a foundational resource for the basics of storytelling) makes it clear that a tragedy ought to "have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end," so that it might "resembl[e] a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it" (*Poetics* XXIII). While many of the *Poetics* tenets are subverted or foregone by modern media, almost every novel and film still operates on the basic narrative premise of 'beginning, middle, and end.' Individual issues and arcs within a comic book run do follow this structure; the larger incongruity arises when comic continuity is taken as a whole. As mentioned above, though Spider-Man's origin can be traced to *Amazing Fantasy #15* in 1962, readers cannot all be expected to begin by parsing through fifty-plus years of content, especially if they want to keep up with the same character's current ongoing series.

Instead, in order to sell issues of current storylines, comics must encourage new readers to jump in without so much prerequisite reading. At the simplest level, the beginning of an issue often provides all the basic information relevant to the plot at hand, either through expository character dialogue or full length recap pages. All this gives the reader new degrees of freedom concerning the storytelling format. While stories still often draw on a longstanding continuity, the reader can navigate from story to story without being so rigidly tied to it. Some might read the first few issues of Spider-Man, and then wander off to read whatever era of the character suits their fancy; others might start at a modern story and move forward from there. Comics further allow for this 'middle-independence' by periodically providing new starting-points for readers to join the story. Sometimes this takes the form of a new "Issue #1." Marvel Comics will

often renumber lines like Spider-Man to designate the beginning of a new run; *Amazing Spider-Man* #801 is followed by *Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 5 #1*, even though the latter is also #802 by legacy numbering. As a result, where Aristotelian tradition demands there be some sort of beginning to a story, comic book tradition actively facilitates reading a story without one. The absolute beginning to Spider-Man's story exists, but the comic book format allows the reader to progress other parts of the story without it.

On the other end of the spectrum, comic books are fundamentally never ending. Even if a particular storyline or series might end, every character from within those stories has infinite capacity to return and progress through new stories. After introducing a character like Ben Reilly (a genetic clone of Peter Parker) and giving him his own series (*The Scarlet Spider*), Marvel will ultimately pull the plug on the line whenever it stops being profitable. However, though the series might end, cutting short any stories told through that specific avenue, the character of Ben Reilly will remain a part of the larger Marvel Universe, available for any story to draw on in the future. As a result, a character's story never truly *ends*.

It will, of course, complete arcs and reach points of contentment as individual plots are created and resolved; however, the persistent mythos that a comic book universe creates transcends any single story, and any character is subject to return in different stories in new ways. Venom (an alien symbiote bonded to a vengeful disgraced photographer named Eddie Brock) began as a foil and nemesis to Spider-Man: a dark shadow of the web-slinger, with all of his abilities and a gaping maw of teeth. However, Venom's popularity has led to the character to return time and time again, transforming over time from villain to anti-hero to hero, full-stop. These developments are not necessarily part of a planned trajectory; instead, the character is referenced and used to fill various roles in other storylines, from an arc villain in *Amazing*

Spider-Man to his own protagonist in *Venom: Lethal Protector*. Comic book characters have the capacity to contain an infinite amount of different meanings and interpretations, and can continue to develop on the page so long as audiences are interested. On one hand, this eternal and interest-driven storytelling model greatly limits a character's capacity for real change: because a character can never definitively end, there is a tendency to return them to a status quo so such stories can continue.

Even death does not definitively end a character's story. Comics infamously keep a very loose tally of a death toll; very rarely does a character stay dead for long. Almost any prominent member of the X-Men has died at *least* once. Certain characters, like Wolverine or Jean Grey, have come back to life enough times for characters to routinely make jokes about it. At the same time, whenever a character does die, it carries the same weight within a story of a death with permanent consequences. The aptly titled *Death of Wolverine* (2014) culminated in the Canadian mutant's self-sacrifice; fans mourned the character's death, even though any savvy reader knew in the back of his or her mind that he would return. (Wolverine returned four years later in the storyline *the Hunt for Wolverine*.) The lack of any true ending in comics necessarily results in the medium's characteristic status quo and impermanence. At the same time, it is responsible for the archetypal comic book character's massive accumulated history. In removing the natural endpoint, comic books attain the capacity for both extreme stagnation and astonishing growth.

The serialized comic book as a story resists a beginning and lacks an ending. This should not be confused with a story that merely rearranges these concepts. A Quentin Tarantino movie might play with and interact with the concept of the Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end; however, it does not disrupt the format as completely as comics do. With regards to Aristotelian standard, a film that shifts time within its narrative still maintains a familiar

narrative shape. *Pulp Fiction* might not begin and end in a linear temporal sense, but still begins and ends. The comic bucks the beginning and ending as a structure, and taken as a larger multi-part narrative, almost foregoes that structure entirely. In its place is something different, that Aristotle might even consider alien: a structurally perpetual middle, that at points often gives the semblance of a beginning or end, but is fundamentally different from the unit structure of the more conventional novel.

As a novel *about* the genesis of the superhero comic, Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* is a particularly well-suited counterpart to compare the actual comic book medium to. As much as it revolves around the icon of low-brow art, Chabon's novel is decidedly literary. Following Kavalier and Clay as they grown into men, Chabon focuses on their personal growth and how they deal with a range of strikingly real and heavy topics, from anti-Semitism and American inaction in World War II to homosexuality and the confusion, fear, and prejudice surrounding it during the period. While comics twist and defy Aristotle's standards, Chabon's novel about them does not particularly deviate in the same way. Of course, accommodating modern sensibilities, *Kavalier and Klay* breaks from some of Aristotle's rules, such as having a tragedy confine itself to a "single revolution of the sun" or keeping the story limited to one plot, with no subplots. However, across its six parts, the story plays out in a beginning, a middle, and an end, and, in tackling the realities of the period through Kavalier and Clay's comic enterprise, most definitely "imitates an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Poetics V, VI).

Affectionate as it is toward the comic book medium, *Kavalier and Clay* keeps a certain narrative distance from the actual comics that are written during the story. Though we get bursts of direct exploration of who the Escapist is and how his story progresses, the medium itself is

only a part of the picture that Chabon paints. In the rest of that picture, Kavalier and Clay must navigate the tensions surrounding ethnicity and political allegiance during World War II, all while undergoing their own personal journeys. Joe wishes to see his family come safely to America as refugees; Sammy struggles with his burgeoning homosexuality in the largely intolerant setting through the 40's and 50's. They live, love, and suffer, and while much of their lives are *about* comics, the story makes a point to contrast the bright and bombastic content of a comic with the darker realities of life in mid-century America.

In Chapter 8 of Part II, when Joe and Sammy are first inventing the secret origin of the Escapist, the reader gets a firsthand glimpse of the hero's story. The narrative takes on the present tense, and Chabon fully realizes the story of young Tom Mayflower, who inherits a mystic key from his escape artist uncle. He depicts larger than life characters like Big Al, who can both "rip open a steel drum like a can of tobacco" and "calculate the velocity of asteroids and comets," or Omar, who "can be a doctor, a pilot, a sailor, a chef" and is "at home on every continent, conversant with the argot of policeman and thieves" (Chabon 129). Because it is still illustrated with Chabon's vivid and colorful prose, it might take a moment for the reader to realize that they have walked into a completely different story. But ultimately, these characters are larger than life and wholly distinct from Sammy and Joe's world. Tom, imbued with power by a mystic key, resolves to fight an insidious secret organization called the Iron Chain and embarks on globetrotting adventures with his trusty companions. Through this glimpse into *Kavalier and Clay's* comic book world, Chabon provides the novel's golden example of a comic in its creative prime: ridiculous, fantastical, and unrepentantly improbable, but articulated and illustrated with the same care and gravity paid to any artistic and literary endeavor.

By the time the veil is broken, the reader returns to the two boys “walking along the trembling hem of reality that separated New York City from Empire City,” with Joe wistfully wishing the *Escapist* were real (135). In crossing back over to the real world, the novel also acknowledges the delineation between a comic book and realistic prose. The *Escapist* is stylized and idealized, while Sammy and Joe capture the nuance and humanity that a proper literary novel seeks to express. Chabon juxtaposes the distinct unreality of the *Escapist*’s origin with *Kavalier and Clay*’s reality, simultaneously supporting the burgeoning comic book art form and acknowledging the medium’s flaws and shortcomings.

The story itself compares the novel to the fledgling art form of the comic book— George Deasey, jaded old editor of Empire Comics, acts as a representative of the old guard of high-art novelists in rapidly changing world. Himself a literary artist with lofty, literary standards, Deasey has nonetheless found a career in writing pulp novels and “never [loses] an opportunity to ridicule himself for earning his living by them” (156). As a result, he looks down on the young, commercialized comic book format with unabashed scorn. When *Kavalier and Clay* first pitch the *Escapist*, Deasey remarks to their face: “You know, don’t you, that this is pure trash. Superman is pure trash, too, of course. Batman, the Blue Beetle. The whole menagerie” (Chabon 157). By placing this character in such close proximity and authority to Empire Comics, Chabon raises a question of artistic merit in low-brow art that remains relevant throughout the narrative.

Deasey’s disdain for the medium stems from his own upper-class educated, literary standards. It shows most prominently through his affinity for the novel: a time-tested, long accepted prestige format that produces “true literature,” and a direct foil to the indulgent and poppy comic book that *Kavalier and Clay* champion. At the same time, Deasey (by far the most experienced writer in the novel when he is introduced) has extensive experience in writing pulp

fiction, which as an episodic and commercial endeavor is the closest analogue to comic books that the story presents. George Deasey sees himself as an artist churning out empty products for a paying audience, and in turn he sees himself in Kavalier and Clay.

Naturally, the two young creators work to prove Deasey wrong, achieving new artistic and literary heights in the format throughout their career. Early on in their meteoric success, Deasey remarks that “[they’ve] come up with some good ideas that have sold well” and “begun to make a name for themselves,” albeit in a “third-rate industry by cranking out nonsense for numbskulls” (225). As a writer that has found success doing the same through the pulp novel, Deasey has the authority to maintain his scorn; however his commendation of the unrelenting commercial success of the *Escapist* suggests something approaching respect. As the representative of the proper literary novel in the story, Deasey’s budding opinion suggests something about the comic book’s artistic merit. The pulp novel is an offshoot of the novel (the reigning literary prestige format), and however commercialized it is in comparison, it bears the same stamp of resemblance to the latter. Wearing “the stiff-collared shirts and high button-waistcoats of his generation of literary men,” Deasey writes his pulps seriously, with “verve and an erudite touch” (156). When he offers Clay the chance to write a novel for one of his pulps (the *Gray Goblin* in *Racy Police Stories*), Clay writes three, which “Joe had read and enjoyed,” but “Deasey [dissected] one after another, each time with terse, bitter criticism that was infallibly accurate” (221). The heightened literary air of high-brow criticism permeates even the lowest-brow example of the novel in *Kavalier and Clay*. Nonetheless, they are ultimately episodic and low-culture, and Deasey reaches undeniably great success selling those. Kavalier and Clay’s comic book character in turn ultimately surpasses that success by the end of the novel, making

artistic strides the entire way. How different, then, is the comic book format in artistic merit? Do the differences in format demand a different metric of comparison for success?

In the final part of the novel, the reader is reintroduced to Clay as a veteran writer and, in many respects, Deasey's direct successor. Jaded by the events of the novel (including a separation from Kavalier), Sammy finds himself disillusioned by the burgeoning comics industry, with his passion for the medium tempered by time and experience. Still churning out serial comics for money, he finds himself treading the path that Deasey walked: stymied as he tries to write a great literary novel, aptly titled *American Disillusionment*: a constantly morphing story that "had taken the form, at various times, of a bitter comedy, a stoical Hemingwayesque tragedy, a hard-nosed lesson in social anatomy like something by John O'Hara, a bare-knuckles urban *Huckleberry Finn*" (Chabon 543). Despite his extensive experience, the veteran writer Sam Clay cannot crack the high-brow and serious pursuit of a novel. Instead, he consistently waffles about, unable to commit substantively to a style or even a plot for years at a time. A literary purist might draw the conclusion that this signifies some empirically higher bar of quality to the novel: a level of quality that Sammy cannot meet. However, *Kavalier and Clay* does not paint the older Sammy as anything approaching an incapable, or even an average writer. On the contrary, by his adult life Chabon describes Sammy as such:

He was a furious, even romantic, typist, prone to crescendos, diminuendos, dense and barged arpeggios, capable of ninety words a minute when under deadline or pleased with the direction his story was taking, and over the years his brain had become an instrument so thoroughly tuned to the generation of highly conventional, severely formalistic, eight-to-twelve page miniature epics that he could, without great effort, write, talk, smoke, listen to a ball game, and keep an eye on the clock at the same time. He had reduced two

typewriters to molten piles of slag iron and springs since his return to comics, and when he went to bed at night his mind remained robotically engaged in its labor while he slept, so that his dreams were often laid out in panels and interrupted by surrealistic advertising, and when he woke up in the morning he would find that he had generated enough material for a full issue of one of his magazines.” (Chabon 486).

From his bouts of feverish energy to his veteran familiarity with the medium, it is clear that, within the comic book format, Sammy is a master writer. Moreover, Sammy is well-versed in specific skills uniquely crucial to the industry. He has the creativity and sheer generative force to continuously put out new material to meet the content demands of a commercial, serialized story. He realizes this content at a breakneck pace, constantly operating under the deadline of publication for multiple monthly magazines. Furthermore, he visualizes his written material as it finally appears: a paneled visual product, complete with advertisement. Through Sammy, Chabon sketches a portrait of the comic book, diametrically opposite the prestigious literary novel. By itself, Sammy’s hyper-competency at writing comics does not resolve the possibility that comics are low culture relative to the novel. However, it does establish comics as a separate medium to be competent *in*: one with the different metrics for success like postulated above.

In fact, Chabon’s language suggests that there *is*, in fact, more than meets the eye to the comic book medium. Most bouts of extreme episodic storytelling are depicted as exercises in conformity: creatively sterile work churned off a production line. However, though it is fundamentally formulaic, Sammy’s comic writing is never depicted as soulless, or creatively dead. Instead, by juxtaposing “eight to twelve page miniature epics” with classical language like “crescendos, diminuendos and ... arpeggios,” Chabon creates a sense of the artistry behind comic book storytelling— an art form all its own. When Sammy “reduce[s] two typewriters to

molten piles of slag iron,” Chabon invokes an industrial energy in Sammy as an engine as much as he is a writer: a force of production that relentlessly progresses. In doing so, he merges the writer’s artistry with a pragmatic and capitalist sensibility. Through Sammy, Chabon characterizes the comic book writer as the working man to the novelist’s lofty artist: both create art through written narrative, but where the latter has the luxury to prioritize literary importance and aesthetic ideals, the former is constrained (and defined) by a realism: money must be made, and deadlines must be met.

Due to the constant pressure of such publication deadlines, Sammy cannot ponder the direction of a story or spend time perfecting every move; the story must constantly move forward. As issues and problems arise in the story, a writer like Sammy solves them by course-correcting from episode to episode as the story is written: laying down the tracks as the train chugs on, so to speak. Thusly, when he tries to write *American Disillusionment*, the novel fails Sammy as a medium—unlike the comic book, which is iterative and episodic across large sums of smaller tales, the novel is a single large and unwieldy unit.

Where the comic series has discrete points separating part of the whole from another, delineating where the story can pivot and grow, the novel is an unbroken narrative. Moreover, it must be a unified one: as understood through Aristotelian standards, unity of plot dictates that every part of the plot interact wholly and meaningfully with each other. Changing one part of the novel necessitates change in the rest. Sammy is paralyzed by the novel for this very reason; instead of being able to truck on and assemble the story through piecemeal installations, he must plan and construct the novel as a whole. Furthermore, the comic book medium is defined by its multiformity, with the freedom to change the shape of the story and narrative from episode to episode. By contrast, every time Sammy finds himself drawn to a new style of writing, he must

transform the entire novel—a laborious affair that likely in turn prevents the forward movement so crucial to a comic book writer. In comics, Sammy could pivot easily across a range of styles, spanning “costumed hero, romance, horror, adventure, true-crime, science fiction and fantasy, Westers, sea yarns, and Bibles stories...every genre but funny animals” (485). For *American Disillusionment*, Sammy cannot settle on a single style because he is unaccustomed to maintaining one literary shape for so long. Formulaic as the comic might be (especially in Sammy’s post-Escapist work), it is a dynamic, creatively diverse genre, capable of shifting and aping a multitude of styles to achieve different effects across swaths of episodes. Sammy cannot complete his novel because of the *limitations* of the rarefied literary format: an immense and ponderous beast that cannot match the narrative agility of the serialized comic book.

This agility is a necessary tool for the serialized comic book to continue developing in its impressive lifespan. Like Sammy, writers maintain a continuous narrative, with characters like Batman or Spider-Man constantly starring in one new adventure after another. For as long as these serialized narratives run, they can give the illusion of something akin to the novel’s unbroken narrative: a massive body of work that spans decades of material. However, (once more, like Sammy,) these writers are also inventing, innovating, and course-correcting as they go. This goes even further when a writer passes the story down to the next. Massive bodies of work separate a character like Spider-Man’s first stories from the ones today, and they are fundamentally piecemeal: going from writer to writer, incorporating changes and developments in format, style, and social atmosphere as they come. Comparing modern incarnations of a familiar character can often make old comics about that character seemingly unrecognizable.

At one point in his first appearance in *Detective Comics #27*, Batman, champion of justice and stringent adherent to the famed ‘no-kill’ rule, sends a criminal tumbling into a vat

acid and remarks, “A fitting end for his kind.” Peter Parker often refers to women as ‘females’ in his adolescence, and engages in the casual verbal sexism so rampant in the 60’s. These stories are products of their time, and just as they highlight the eccentricities of multiform comic book storytelling, multiform comic storytelling allows these characters to grow past those stories. As strange as it is to see Batman condemn a criminal to death for his crimes, readers will also see him develop his cardinal ‘no-kill’ moral compass soon enough— around when society might have determined that killing was culturally unacceptable for an upstanding hero like the Bat.

Similarly, as an everyman figure, Peter Parker adopts the vernacular of the common youth readily: speaking like a 60’s college student in the 60’s, and using modern internet slang around when the internet became a permanent fixture in modern culture. That a character’s speech and behavior is influenced by the period in which they were written is not unique; that the very same character is able to adjust and change from one period to the next in real time is another thing entirely. As a format relentlessly engaged in rapid iteration, comics must be an agile medium to continue their long-form storytelling. This approach allows them to evolve with contemporary events and comment on them as they develop.

Furthermore, while (as mentioned above) comic book tends to hold hard and fast to continuity, the interpretation of that continuity is remarkably fluid. Events that occurred long ago in continuity almost always maintain canonicity, but they are often updated, retold, or expanded upon: both to match current storytelling style and standards and to open new avenues for storytelling. One of the most prominent examples is the Spider-Man origin story. Famously told for the first time in *Amazing Fantasy #15* in 1962, Uncle Ben’s tragic death at the hands of a robber and a teenage Peter Parker’s subsequent guilt shape the Spider-Man mythos at its core. The origin has always been in continuity as the cornerstone of Spider-Man’s identity; however,

over the years, it has been retold numerous times, often updating the time setting to make Peter's age line up with his current status as a young adult in the modern world. As a character, Peter Parker has been in his nebulous 20's since the 1970's; Marvel Comics have long operated on a paradoxical sliding time scale that can shift and change to accommodate such continuity disjoints. One retelling of an origin story might feature a band that pinpoints a point in the 1990's; another recent one featured smartphones and modern technology befitting a teenage Peter Parker in modern times. Yet another explores unseen, untold facets of that same origin, focusing on the identity of Peter Parker's parents (revealed, shockingly, to have been agents of security and espionage organization S.H.I.E.L.D), or expanding on the man that killed Uncle Ben. The temporal inconsistencies are an unavoidable result of keeping up a perpetual serialized story for over fifty years; the retroactive additions can often complicate stories, at best adding narrative depth and at worst convoluting the character's entire history. However, under the comic book storytelling structure, regular comic book readers recognize these implicit problems and understand what matters: Uncle Ben is dead, and Peter Parker blames himself.

Underneath the colorful capes and explosions, a fundamentally different narrative structure emerges: one that must be evaluated on its own terms, rather than on the terms of other formats. Whether it is its decentralized, shared narrative across multiple writers, its massive and pluralistic history, or its roots and continued position as a profit-driven enterprise, the serialized comic book stands apart from most other storytelling formats. The comic book is not a novel, a film, or Aristotelian drama, nor does it aim to be any of those things. Instead, through its history and the forces that shaped that history, the serialized comic book has emerged as a massive and multiform medium.

A central mythos stands at the heart of any comic book character, and a great collection of these characters create the foundation of continuity that modern serialized comic books draws upon. Other storytelling formats could be likened to bodies of water: varied in depth and size, but identifiably singular, with defined boundaries. In such a context, the serialized comic book is a river: a more amorphous collective narrative and mythos, following a discernible path but constantly shifting and flowing in real time. Individual comic book lines stem off from the mythos like tributaries, utilizing different parts of the river to forge paths in different directions. Most importantly, with all its moving individual parts, the entire narrative river never ends: constantly surging forward, incorporating new pieces as it goes, and opening up new paths for more tributaries over time. Though it breaks the mold of what a traditional narrative might look like, this fluidity ultimately benefits the serialized comic book. A reader can enter the river at any point without having to concern him or herself with absorbing it from start to finish. The writer is free to take the flow of the story down whichever path they choose: should they choose a path that proves unsuccessful, the line might end, but the narrative can persist, moving past and forgetting any missteps and ultimately moving forward until another direction works.

As a result, comics have the freedom to explore strange and bizarre ideas in staggering volume. A dark anti-hero like the Punisher exists in the Marvel canon alongside Spider-Man, the fun and heartfelt everyman of the Marvel universe, who in turn exists alongside Howard the Duck: a cigar smoking anthropomorphic duck from a planet of funny talking animals. This trial-and-error based iterative process is the root of the narrative potpourri of tones, ideas, and stories that make up a comic-book universe. Where a novel must ensure that all its pieces ultimately work together in the final product, comics are a perpetual in-progress, throwing ideas at the wall and constantly seeing what sticks.

Chapter 2

With an expansively long publication history and unrivaled prominence in pop culture both inside and outside of comics, Spider-Man is arguably the serialized comic book at its apex: a property that has successfully produced iconic storylines across decades of material and crystallized them all into an intricate character mythos. In the previous chapter, I covered many of the theoretical and conceptual ideas lending credence to the serialized comic book as a valid alternative storytelling medium—building my argument from the ground up, so to speak. Doing so helps create a justification for why the serialized comic book might *theoretically* have success as unique storytelling platform; now, by studying Spider-Man more closely as a case study in serialized comic book storytelling, I can take those theoretical claims and compare them directly to an actual success case. To some extent, a character Spider-Man confers a level of relevance to the comic book medium by sheer virtue of his existence: the question is *what* worked, rather than whether it worked or not, because Spider-Man has undeniably found meteoric success since his creation over four decades ago. In investigating the character's publication origins, I can also track the flexibility and growth of the superhero comic medium. Nobody could have imagined the success that Spider-Man would find from the outset; exploring how the uniquely iterative and improvisational format of comics adapted to that success will hopefully provide more general insight into the medium as a whole.

Crucially, Spider-Man entered the scene at a point in comics where the medium had already enjoyed its breakout success. The character was created in the midst of an already established comic book and superhero cultural landscape. The low culture landscape of costumed heroes and comic books had been established with popular characters like Superman and Batman; though popularity had gone through a lull in post-war sensibilities, the superhero was

very much an established figure in pop culture. Furthermore, the conventions and trappings of the genre were well defined—the world had already seen Superman and countless imitators, and the world had seen those imitators come and go. During the aftermath of World War II, the initial swell of success surrounding superheroes had waned, and interest had turned to other genres: Westerns, romances, science fiction, and so on. The genre began to regain momentum in the mid-1950's leading up to the early 1960's—DC Comics (then called National Comics) had found success in revamping older heroes like Green Lantern and the Flash, and by 1960 the Justice League of America spearheaded renewed interest in the superhero comic.

Around the same time, Marvel (previously Atlas Comics, and Timely Publications before that) had just one year earlier struck renewed superhero success through the Fantastic Four. Where DC Comics leveraged their more well-established characters to buoy the Justice League's success, Marvel found its footing by tweaking the well-known superhero formula. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby sought to tell more sophisticated stories through the superhero comic medium—stories about colorful characters that were fundamentally human on the inside. When the Fantastic Four emerged in 1961 as a superhero team to rival the Justice League of America, the comic found its success by portraying costumed adventurers as a dysfunctional family unit more than anything: a misshapen nuclear family with more personal flaws and failings than the lantern-jawed, larger than life heroes at DC. By understanding the readership's expectations from a formulaic genre and pioneering a new way to subvert those expectations, Marvel carved out a niche for more mature and sophisticated superhero storytelling, advancing the genre and expanding appeal to a wider demographic (previously thought to be exclusively knuckled-headed grade school boys). The Fantastic Four's success offered Marvel creators a template for

re-energized superhero storytelling: one that eschewed superhero conventions and portraying more grounded human beings thrust into fantastical situations.

All this is to say that the character of Spider-Man was hardly produced in a vacuum. The character came to be at a key junction in the development of superhero comics— the point where superhero comics had existed long enough to see the end of their initial boom, and where the hard nature of capitalistic competition had already picked off all but the most successful of the bunch. A new character could not merely succeed by virtue of being a superhero, as was the case in the wake of Superman’s inception. Straight superhero storytelling was passé, and a comic had to bring more to the table to differentiate itself from the pack. With the Fantastic Four’s success, Marvel proved that such innovation could be done successfully. However, in an industry built on formulaic storytelling, where a comic’s goal is to make as much money as possible with as little effort as possible, that kind of narrative creativity is usually the exception.

As such, much like Peter Parker’s radioactive spider bite, Spider-Man’s success was a kind of fantastical accident: a combination of circumstances in the right place at the right time. The character was not created as a headlining superhero to begin with: he was first published in the last issue of a cancelled anthology magazine (*Amazing Fantasy #15*). Formerly titled *Amazing Adult Fantasy* (before being re-dubbed *Amazing Fantasy* for its final issue), each issue of the series consisted of multiple shorter stories that ran the gamut of the strange and fantastical. The imprint was far from a superhero comic; the stories ranged from science fiction to fantasy to light horror, usually involving some unsuspecting character’s brush with the supernatural. In the same final issue of *Amazing Fantasy*, a criminal on the run escapes the law with the help of a mystical mummy’s sarcophagus, a bell-ringer on a Mediterranean island is compelled to ring the island bells amidst a disastrous volcanic eruption, and a family finds themselves imperiled by a

manhunt for Martians living among them. The draw to each of these stories were oftentimes a twist at the very end—a supernatural turn that would turn the short story on its head as it ended. The criminal finds himself transported to ancient Egypt and condemned to hard labor working on the pyramids, and the family is revealed to be the Martians themselves. These pulp fiction reminiscent stories were not meant to carry the extended narratives or winding plots associated with comics today, and the story of Spider-Man was (at least initially) no different. On the cover, Stan Lee declares:

Like costumed characters? Confidentially, we in the comic mag business refer to them as ‘long underwear characters’! And as you know, they’re a dime a dozen! But we think you may find our *Spiderman* just a bit... different! (*Amazing Fantasy #15*).

Spider-Man was clearly created in conversation with the superhero genre in mind—an *Amazing Fantasy* character placed against the backdrop of superhero comics in order to subvert expectations. However, at its core, the original Spider-Man story reads just like any of the other three stories in *Amazing Fantasy #15*: another one-off story about an ordinary everyman touched by the strange, capped off with some twist to shock readers. The story was not originally written to slot into the straightforward superhero tradition: it drew on the format’s familiar tropes, but only in order to draw readers in when the story diverged from those conventions. There was little heroic about Peter Parker, initially—his physical build was slight, and he was characterized as a stock-standard nerd archetype. But even after the fateful spider bite, Peter’s first thought is to pursue fame and fortune: he famously lets a criminal escape before regretting it when (in the twist) it is revealed that the same criminal killed his uncle. The character only dons the costume and persona for money; his heroic act (catching the criminal) is almost entirely a function of vengeance, and we see the Amazing Spider-Man receive his comeuppance for his short-sighted

and selfish actions. Readers received an off-kilter story about guilt and responsibility packaged in a superhero a shell: something that read more like a moralistic fable than any sort of earnest superhero narrative.

Now, as interesting as all of these factors are, the most likely and immediate reason why Spider-Man made it to publishing was that the magazine was already cancelled. In the forward to a *Marvel Masterworks* collection, Stan Lee recalls that *Amazing Fantasy #15* had already been confirmed as the publication's last issue. Spider-Man was largely approved as a throwaway idea: one that could be run because, no matter how unsuccessful it was, the comic would be cancelled in the end anyways. Perhaps directly because of this, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko were emboldened; after all, what was there to lose? The two creators concocted the Spider-Man in the petri dish of a foregone conclusion; a thoroughly unheroic bookworm with teenage anxieties and neuroses, given all the powers of a widely feared and maligned eight-legged animal. Precedents were broken; teenagers were conventionally never more than sidekicks, and a proper superhero lived glamorously, and yet there Peter Parker was, jeered at by peers and coddled by his elderly aunt and uncle. Steve Ditko (who pencilled many of the oddball stories in *Amazing Fantasy*) brought out an ugly humanity in the faces of all his characters: originally perfectly suited for a light horror comic, Steve Ditko's style highlighted an almost grotesque quality to Peter Parker's world, exaggerating faces to be expressive rather than photogenic. The hero himself was in a fully covered mask, with narrow, slant bug eyes, skinny fingers, and a consciously lean, adolescent build that set him apart from barrel-chested characters like Superman or Batman. Once again, part of why Spider-Man was so different from other superheroes was because the character was conceived on the outside of the superhero tradition looking in. The wall-crawler had his roots in *Amazing Fantasy's* sci-fi/fantasy/horror blend just as much, if not more so than

the standard superhero fare of the times. Yet at the same time, in the freedom of *Amazing Fantasy's* cancellation, Lee and Ditko were able to tap back into the same off-beat, human spirit that made the *Fantastic Four* a successful straightforward superhero book.

The rest, as they say, is history. *Amazing Fantasy #15* sold the most out of the entire line, and, following *Fantasy's* cancellation, *Amazing Spider-Man* was released seven months after, on March 10th, 1963. The character was quickly adjusted and adapted to a more sustained, episodic format: recurring problems like the Parker family's financial problems and Peter's adolescent angst featured just as prominently as the cycling cast of bizarre super-villains. Most importantly, the comic followed up and doubled down on Peter Parker's tumultuous, unheroic personal life. Now, he was more than just an unconventionally strange hero in ways that might repulse readers: he was one that repulsed citizens too.

Though *The Amazing Spider-Man #1* featured a handful of stories that introduced several super-heroic challenges (a Russian spy and master of disguise and a crashing space probe among them!), it also introduced the web-slinger to a far more pervasive and troublesome foe: J. Jonah Jameson, a newspaper editor whose sole goal in life seemed to be to ruin Spider-Man's name. In his introduction, he writes an article denouncing the wall-crawler as a menace: this swiftly ends Parker's entertainment career, which he had relied on to help support himself and Aunt May, and the story ends with Peter hopeless and frustrated as Aunt May pawns off her jewelry. The next one begins with astronaut John Jameson (J. Jonah Jameson's son) hurtling to the earth in the aforementioned space probe. In superhero fashion, Spider-Man comes to the rescue, commandeering a pilot and plane to get him close before pulling himself to the probe by webline and freeing the parachute. Yet, to Parker's shock and dismay, this does not earn a retraction from the paper; instead, the elder Jameson declares Spider-Man a glory hound that must have

orchestrated the probe's failure, and demands that anybody who sees him report him to the FBI immediately. Parker is left jobless and hated even more by the public—even his Aunt May exclaims that she “certainly hope[s] they find that horrible Spider-Man and lock him up before he can do any harm!” (*The Amazing Spider-Man #1*).

Notably, Jameson's diatribes against the “masked menace” of Spider-Man are remarkably reminiscent of very real arguments leveled against comics at the time. The Daily Bugle publisher warns the public that the “masked menace ... is a bad influence on our youngsters!” and that “children may try to imitate his fantastic feats,” and concludes that “Spider-Man must be *outlawed!* There is no place for such a dangerous creature in our fair city” (*The Amazing Spider-Man #1*). Though simplified for the panels of a comic, this fiery and reactionary outcry echoes the sentiment of real life figures like Fredric Wertham: a well-respected psychiatrist who, in 1948, waged war against what he perceived as unsavory dangers to impressionable young minds.

In *The Ten-Cent Plague*, Hajdu documents Wertham's claim that “comic-book reading was a distinct influencing factor in the case of every single delinquent or disturbed child we studied” and were “in intent and effect, demoralizing the morals of youth” (Hajdu 101). Wertham declares that “if those responsible refuse to clean up the comic-book market—and to all appearances most of them do, the time has come to legislate these books off the newsstand and out of the candy stores” (Hajdu 102). Yet eloquent as they may be, Wertham's points may as well have come out of the Daily Bugle itself: Hajdu minces no words calling Wertham “susceptible to illogic, conjecture, and peculiar leaps in reasoning,” and notes that “his evidence was slim” and often included cases that never mentioned comics at all (99, 101). Hajdu's novel tracks the rest of the comics scare and its effects, ending its historical account in the 1950's.

In this established capes and comic landscape, Lee and Ditko's careers were shaped directly by the events chronicled in *The Ten-Cent Plague*. A character like J. Jonah Jameson not only draws on their real-world experience of baseless accusation in the media, but positions Spider-Man as a character once again engaged with the medium in a meta-sense. Before, he did so by bucking the trend of a superhero comic with a Stan Lee wink-and-nod. Now, he finds himself besieged by a picture-perfect representation of the media that assaulted the comics industry—a hero play-acting out the same conflict that pit comics against the real world.

On a more thematic and narrative level, the entire issue echoes the sentiment of one man against the world. Nothing Peter does is met with anything but negative consequences. In his debut, he makes a mistake and ultimately suffers the loss of his uncle as a direct result of that mistake. By contrast, in *The Amazing Spider-Man #1*, he performs unambiguously heroic actions only to be met with hostility and punishment in response. Each of the stories tracks an exploit of Spider-Man's, beginning with his attempt to perform to audiences for money and ending with a tortured acceptance of his status as a social pariah. At one point, reading the incendiary article shaming him after saving John Jameson, he bemoans:

“Everything I do as Spider-Man seems to turn out wrong! What good is my fantastic power if I *cannot* use it?? Or, must I be forced to become what they accuse me of being?? Must I *really* become a menace? Perhaps— that is the only course left for me!”

Peter Parker's early angst-laden monologues like this betray a crucial understanding of the material on Lee and Ditko's part. Other writers might pinpoint the success of Spider-Man's original *Amazing Fantasy* debut to the character's bleak circumstances and his inability to succeed. However, Peter Parker's life is not senselessly miserable; he does not just begrudge the world and wallow in self-pity. *Amazing Spider-Man #1* tracks his *action* through the story as he

grapples with each new obstacle. He performs as Spider-Man to make money and solve his income problem. When public opinion turns against him and makes that impossible, he works to clear his name with Jameson. He finds himself at yet another crossroads when that only yields more headache and vitriol. Like a mouse in a maze, he chases rewards and reacts to stimuli, and finds himself baffled when he reaches the end and receives a shock rather than a reward. Readers watch paths close and see Peter funneled to more and more desperate circumstances as his options dwindle.

When Peter questions his own misfortune, the narrative acknowledges just how much trouble it has put the teenager through and lets the audience know that it is consciously putting him through this wringer to test the character. As in his debut, Spider-Man gained traction for being more than just another costumed character; the character is a beleaguered teen faced with a world against him. The reader sees him stymied by circumstances outside his control time and time again, and because the character subverts so many superhero narratives, when Peter Parker asks himself what he ought to do, no easy answers present themselves. The character is something more complex: still very much a hybrid born both of superhero convention and *Amazing Fantasy*'s more open-ended fare. It is not hard to imagine readers earnestly asking themselves the same question Peter is: "Must he *really* become a menace?"

Of course, when Parker does not follow through on this ominous thought, the Chameleon enters and does so for him. An espionage agent with an arsenal of disguises at his disposal, Chameleon disguises himself as Spider-Man to steal missile defense plans, further alienating him from the government and the public. The Chameleon is apprehended, but not before Parker finds himself accused of theft and called a traitor by the police and the military. Alone, this might not seem like the most troubling for a proper costumed hero; yet, when confronted with this last

straw, after every other woe in the issue, Peter has had enough. Issue #1 ends as a “lone figure loses himself in the shadows of the silent night ...” and Peter Parker declares that, “*Nothing* turns out right ... *Sob* [sic] ... I wish I had never *gotten* my superpowers!” There is no final triumph, or declaration of heroic fortitude. Peter is beaten down, defeated by nothing more than the harsh reality he lives in. Just like *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the story ends on an uncharacteristically melancholy note for the masked hero—yet it also manages to magnify and intensify the character’s troubles. The initial escapism of a bullied teenager gaining superpowers and colorful costume is turned on its head; if anything, Spider-Man ends the story more bullied than Peter Parker, and Peter denounces his superpowers out of sheer frustration at the fact. The new dedicated serial format also adds a new dimension to Lee and Ditko’s tortured hero: if this issue laid our hero so low, what could he possibly endure in the next one? The persistent continuity that a dedicated series provided ensured persistent headaches and woes for the web-slinger. If Parker’s life felt like cruel justice before, it just feels cruel now.

The creative team’s ability to shift from an anthology magazine to a dedicated hero magazine afforded the creative team the extra room to paint Peter Parker’s life in sharper relief. Here, the rapid-paced, iterative industry of the comics world facilitated Spider-Man’s success more than any literary medium would. In the previous chapter I discussed the agility of the serialized comic in theoretical terms and through reconstructed history like Chabon’s *Kavalier and Clay*; here, the *Amazing Spider-Man*’s genesis demonstrates it firsthand. Able to assess the source of the character’s success in *Amazing Fantasy*, Lee and Ditko were then able to consciously home in on the most compelling aspects of the character and focus on them moving forward with *The Amazing Spider-Man*. If Peter’s very real and human troubles drew readers in, the creative team could make a clear and identifiable effort to further drive Peter Parker’s life to

the brink. The comic made its splash by bucking the superhero formula and comic book convention, but the transition from *Amazing Fantasy* to *The Amazing Spider-Man* was a direct product of the serialized comic book's hallmark and signature: bring it back, but bigger and better!

The new series brought with it other differences. As a proper headlining superhero, Marvel quickly connected it to its other prominent superhero property in the line's first issue: in one of *#1*'s short stories, Spider-Man goes to the Fantastic Four in hope of gainful employment. Impulsive teenager that he is, he breaks into their home at the Baxter Building and attempts to showboat to prove himself a worthy member of a superhero team; in a classic superhero punch up, Spider-Man dukes it out with the Four for a few panels before the misunderstanding is cleared up. Of course, the Spider-Man twist is there—the Fantastic Four are a non-profit organization, and Spidey is left embarrassed and frustrated that even cosmically endowed humans cannot seem to find him a decent-paying job.

More meaningfully, however, this story quickly folded Peter Parker into the rapidly expanding Marvel Universe: the hallmark shared continuity that readers now are so familiar with. The marketing advantages of this sort of synergy are clear: Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four were two wildly successful lines that quickly earned Marvel a name as serious comics competitors, and letting them cross over into one another would introduce fans of one to the other and hopefully produce consumers of both.

If the initial issue proved that the series would follow the roots set by *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the ensuing run would set the roots that all subsequent Spider-Man depictions would stem from. Peter's high school peers—Liz Allan and Flash Thompson among them—would become slightly more fleshed out as recurring faces in the teenager's life. With little exception, the foes

faced by Spider-Man during the original Lee-Ditko era have endured as “classic Spider-Man villains”: The Vulture, The Lizard, Doctor Octopus, and the Sandman are only a handful of the iconic villains Parker clashes with early on in his career, and they quickly establish themselves as threats that rear their heads multiple times in the original comics. Now, a character’s true iconicity is something that seems simultaneously easy to identify and difficult to define; does one measure by issue sales? Appearances in media? Recognition in public surveys? The question is further complicated by the fact that such characters are functions of Spider-Man’s success. While Spider-Man’s success in the pop culture landscape might be gauged broadly by the number of titles he has starred in and their success, the iconicity of Peter Parker’s foes and supporting cast are largely relegated to their presence in those Spider-Man titles. Once again, because of the iterative comic book writing process, creators like Lee and Ditko do not need to adhere to a rigid script— within reason, they can take a character’s success and pivot to capitalize. A character like Doctor Octopus appeared three different times across the series’ first twelve issues. When the Green Goblin debuted in issue #14, the villain quickly became one of the wall-crawler’s most prolific foes, flying scot-free and menacing him four more times in the next thirteen issues.

Both characters are widely considered archnemeses to the web-slinger, enjoying wide pop culture recognition and representation as the villains in film adaptations like *Spider-Man*, *Spider-Man 2*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. In a sense, the comics method of storytelling allowed Lee and Ditko (and later creative teams as well) to sift through ideas and test them against the public in real time, issue to issue. The Spider-Man mythos began in the initial issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and the cornerstone pieces of that mythos made themselves apparent in an organic fashion. Nobody might have guessed that Doctor Octopus or the Green

Goblin would hound the masked hero for the next four decades—they would only be able to identify which issues were most exciting.

After all, as discussed previously, the comic book medium's unique storytelling qualities mean that tracking the character's roots during his time with a single creative team only provides part of the story. Though Lee and Ditko laid the groundwork that subsequent iterations would build on, they do not hold a creative monopoly on the "definitive Spider-Man." Instead, we can see that the definitive Spider-Man grows as a multifaceted mythos over time through multiple creators. After *The Amazing Spider-Man #38*, Ditko left the title and Lee joined with John Romita Sr. as the new series artist in the following issue. Though he had worked in the past with Marvel on lines like *Daredevil* and *Avengers*, John Romita Sr.'s most immediate stylistic wheelhouse was in romance comics. He had worked previously with DC Comics on titles like *Young Love*, *Girls' Romances*, and *Falling in Love*, working in varying capacities on pencils, inks, and covers. The switch from Ditko to Romita would be the first creative change the character would see.

The potential impact of this change should not be understated. Though Lee stayed on as the writer, Ditko as artist contributed just as much to the character readers know today; the character's underdog and outsider status and his off-beat stories were visually matched by Ditko's lithe masked figure, creeping up walls and contorting in strange ways. Moreover, they made use of the Marvel method: a comic book writing style where the writer gives the artist a general synopsis and allows the artist to plot the specifics of the entire story out visually, panel by panel; the writer then goes back afterwards to insert the dialogue. This gives the artist even more creative agency in the final product of a comic, and blurs the lines that separates them from writer. While not every comic book operated like this (the term is the Marvel method for a

reason), it stands to reason that such a visual medium would draw so much more of its narrative structure from the artist. Like Sammy and Joe collaborate in *Kavalier and Clay* as creative equals in the creation of the likes of the Escapist or Luna Moth, teams like Ditko and Lee cannot be easily separated as single creators to a creation like Spider-Man.

At first, when he came onto the series in 1966 (for issue #28), Romita Sr. consciously tried to make his arrival as discreet as possible. This meant both mimicking the sparser, less detailed layouts of early Spider-Man comics and imitating Ditko's pen-drawn art style directly—which was particularly difficult because Romita Sr. preferred brushes. In an interview with SYFY Wire, the artist recalls:

I was a brush man. When I used to do the romance, I worked with a brush. And I could get some nice thick and thin accents and good clothing textures and things like that. Ditko was a pen man. And I felt obliged to do Spider-Man in nine panels like Ditko because that's what the fans are used to. And I tried for the first year to use a pen, which was hard for me. I lost my flair, but I tried it. And I think maybe in the beginning of the second year I started to cheat and use the brush a bit more. And you could see my stuff was somewhat Ditko-like for six or seven months, but slowly but surely I had to put some brush technique in there for weight. And then slowly but surely, Stan said, you know what? Don't try anymore. Do it the way you wanna do it. (SYFY WIRE).

This transition highlights one of the struggles with keeping up a continuous and consistent story while changing hands with creators. When a medium allows for such a story to outlast its creators, the dynamic changes; the story is larger than any single creator, and maintaining a level of consistency in that story is important to continuing its success. In the previous chapter, the idea of the collective story of Spider-Man being greater than any single

creator was invoked positively in order to highlight the character's capacity for multifaceted expression. However, that same creator-creation power dynamic puts pressure on those creators and can limit artistic expression. Any change could risk alienating the readership, and so Romita Sr.'s effort to ease the transition and emulate Ditko was a safe and practical decision, artistically speaking. By adopting Ditko's pen-drawn style in lieu of his ordinary brushes, Romita Sr. minimized influence from his romance background. Yet however much he tried, the difference in the art is immediately noticeable. In stark contrast to Ditko's rough, line-intensive inks, Romita Sr. featured cleaner, bolder lines. The greatest difference was in the faces; rather than Ditko's horror-esque ugly humanity, readers were treated to the stylish, attractive features of a romance artist, reflected in all the characters, from supporting figures to Parker himself.

Romita Sr.'s debut issue highlighted this shift—in #39, the Green Goblin discovers Spider-Man's secret identity, and attacks him at his home in Forest Hills. Most of the fight (including the hero's trademark acrobatic action) occurs in Peter's civilian clothes, giving readers a very clear look at the character's new, more handsomely boyish face. And while Romita Sr. did eventually embrace his style more by introducing different, larger panel layouts and introducing his signature brushwork to the series, he also brought longstanding changes to the narrative of the character.

Originally, Ditko's artistic sensibilities colored the world of Spider-Man with an uncanny, off-kilter charm that centered on an isolated everyman. Peter Parker was the one man against the world, and everyone else—not just the supervillains, but J. Jonah Jameson and his high school peers as well—were scowling, jeering extensions of that hostile world. It wasn't uncommon for Ditko to draw large crowds bustling and speaking about either Peter Parker or Spider-Man— though it was rare for talk to be favorable. In issue #4, after locking up the

Sandman, Peter overhears bystanders talking about the effort. At first, it seems that public opinion could swing in his favor; a man reading a paper remarks that “Spider-Man has captured that awful Sandman!” However, the rest of the comments take a turn for the worse, with passersby declaring that “according to the editorial, Spider-Man is just as bad as the other one” and discussing “[w]hat would make a guy wear a goofy costume and run around chasin’ crooks?” After a man decides that Spider-Man is neurotic, with delusions of grandeur, the issue ends on Peter alone once again, asking himself why he continues crimefighting. He ultimately resolves that he “must remain as Spider-Man... [and] pray that some day the world will understand!” (*Amazing Spider-Man #4*). Under Ditko’s pen, Spider-Man’s life was isolating and alienating, often pitting him against the very citizenship he routinely tries to save.

Peter Parker’s life is no better. Of course, he is always bullied by his high school nemesis Flash Thompson; however, a rotating set of nameless friends join in to make fun of Peter at any given moment. Flash Thompson and Liz Allan are the only named classmates of Peter’s for the duration of his original time at Midtown High; the rest are there solely to populate the school and reinforce the idea that Peter has no friends. At one point during issue #8, when Flash challenges Peter to a boxing match, a gym teacher thinks, “Poor Parker! Not one student is rooting for him! I wish, by some miracle, that he could—but no, he hasn’t a chance!” Peter’s spider-strength is more than a match for the teenager’s bully; he is mostly concerned with holding back enough to ensure Flash’s safety. He faces instead a more stubborn, insurmountable opposition: the judgment of his peers. In the background, a posse of friends crowds Flash, asking him, “What round will you finish him off in, Flash?” and, “You gonna tie one hand behind you, Flash boy?” (*Amazing Spider-Man #8*). These characters might as well represent the rest of Midtown High as

a single character—a collective ‘other’ that serves to multiply the voices against Peter in any given classroom setting.

By contrast, Romita Sr. charged Peter’s world with a vivacious energy. Characters all became far more photogenic under his pen and brush, around the same time Peter Parker began to open up to the previously hostile world around him. After graduating in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #28, Peter had already been thrust into the daunting new world of college life at Empire State University. By #31, Lee and Ditko had introduced new college peers like Harry Osborn and Gwen Stacy: friends who would later become the biggest names in Spider-Man’s mythos and supporting cast. At first they seem like new stand-ins for the same social ostracization that plagued him in high school. For example, in issue #31, when he ignores them because he is too concerned for his bedridden Aunt, they mistake it for snobbishness and decide to play a prank “take that swell-head down a peg!” (*Amazing Spider-Man* #31). They quickly associate with Flash Thompson (Peter’s high school nemesis) and become the new in-crowd; all signs point to the same status quo asserting itself. However, under Romita Sr.’s pen, the story took a rosier turn. The characters carried with them more personality than the faceless bullies of Peter’s past. Gwen found herself attracted to Peter during classes. After the Green Goblin is revealed to be none other than Norman Osborn (Harry Osborn’s father), Peter opens up and reaches out to his struggling classmate, and they become fast friends. By issue #46, Peter is Harry’s college roommate, and he and Flash develop a mutual coexistence at opposite ends of the same friend group. Peter Parker’s world seems to open up to match Romita Sr.’s lush, romantic art—stories centered more and more on his life at school precisely because he had developed one.

Naturally, this expanded focus on Peter’s supporting cast and his life as a young man with the introduction of a romance artist meant the introduction of romance. Now, *The Amazing*

Spider-Man was not a stranger to romantic plots—within the first ten issues, Peter Parker found himself involved in an extended will-they-or-won't-they subplot with Daily Bugle secretary Betty Brant. He also attracted the attention of Liz Allan in high school: Flash's on-off girlfriend who found herself drawn to the aloof Peter Parker (who was usually too preoccupied with Spider-Man matters to notice). These romances tended to be window dressing in most of Spider-Man's adventures; *The Amazing Spider-Man* was not a romance book under Lee and Ditko, and stories involving Betty or Liz focused more on how Peter's role as Spider-Man prevented him from *having* a stable relationship in the first place. However, with John Romita Sr. at the helm alongside Lee, the creative team suddenly had the pedigree to truly draw on romance comics as an inspiration. Romita Sr.'s luscious art and attractive figures and the newly expanded social setting Peter Parker found himself in allowed for more weighty romantic plotlines to form.

One of the figures that illustrates this change most starkly is Mary Jane Watson. First mentioned in issue #15 (still under the original Lee-Ditko team) as the niece of Aunt May's friend Mrs. Watson; Aunt May arranges a blind date, which Peter (pining over Betty Brant) is less than enthused about. Aunt May's proposition comes with a stern message to her nephew: "It's time you began to think seriously about your *future!* You'll want a girl who'll make a good housewife—someone like Mrs. Watson's niece!" Peter brushes this off, mostly concerned with his latest scuffle with Kraven the Hunter. However, his elderly aunt is pushing him (a high schooler) to consider marriage and look for a "good housewife" in a girlfriend. Superpowers aside, this kind of sentiment is one that almost any teenager would find particularly unappealing. Peter soon clashes with Kraven the Hunter and the date never occurs—the faceless Mary Jane Watson becomes a recurring joke, with Peter coming up with different excuses to avoid arrangements in multiple subsequent issues. The closest readers get to seeing this mystery figure

is in issue 25, when she spends time with Aunt May conspicuously hidden behind a potted plant. Liz Allan and Betty Brant are struck by her beauty (“She looks like a *screen star*,” Betty remarks) and both walk away jealous for Parker’s affections, however Peter remains oblivious. While the mystery around who Mary Jane Watson does build over time as a subplot, in the Lee-Ditko narrative Mary Jane Watson amounts to little more than a gag; at most, a wink and a nod at a potential romantic plot in a story primarily concerned with superhero antics.

This changes quickly when John Romita Sr. comes on. Within three issues of his introduction (in *Amazing Spider-Man* #42, specifically), Romita Sr. finally reveals Mary Jane Watson to Peter Parker and the world, uttering the iconic line, “Face it, tiger ... You just hit the jackpot!” A stylish and flirtatious redhead, Mary Jane Watson shifts from an off-screen punchline to one of the most colorful and lively characters in Peter’s life, and quickly becomes part of a love-triangle dynamic between her, Gwen Stacy, and Peter. Romantic melodrama became a core part of the *Amazing Spider-Man* formula—a new take on Peter Parker balancing ordinary problems and superheroics. Rather than dealing with a blanket kind of ostracization, Peter Parker now deals with complex interpersonal relationships, all with romance at the core. This new balance (with individual supporting characters cast into stark relief) proved just as foundational for the Spider-Man mythos. The more mature Peter Parker than juggles evolving relationships with friends and lovers is just as core to the character as the high school outsider; characters introduced during this period like Mary Jane, Harry Osborn, and Gwen Stacy became series mainstays just as iconic as the colorful villains of the Lee-Ditko run. In fact, having a supporting cast in any capacity largely came about under the Lee-Romita era—before then, Peter keeps such a distance from everyone that even Aunt May largely serves as an obstacle to Peter’s heroics rather than a character in her own right. *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s shift from Ditko to

Romita was the first creative change during its run, and tested the title's ability to handle that change—the title proved more than capable, and in fact developed and thrived off of it. While comic books are now often associated with stagnation and the status quo (as a function of their longevity more than anything), the format also allows for significant growth through this multiple creator approach.

As mentioned before, many of the most iconic aspects of the Spider-Man character came from the Lee-Ditko and Lee-Romita eras. By far, they are the stories that get most retold and reinterpreted are the ones from these periods. They fold into the same category as the Peter Parker origin: moments so iconic and so early in the character's development that they cemented themselves as most recognizable pillars of continuity subsequent stories could be built upon. However, the same decentralized narrative authority that let the character grow from Ditko to Romita ensured that more iconic moments would occur—and under a bevy of different writers. In *#121*, Gerry Conway writes “The Night That Gwen Stacy Died,” when Gwen Stacy is thrown by the Goblin off a bridge, only to be killed instantly by a snapped neck when Spider-Man shoots a webline out to save her. The storyline sends shockwaves throughout comic fandom and might be *the* most iconic Spider-Man story outside of his origin: the idea that such a core character (Peter Parker's girlfriend!) could die, no strings attached, shocked readers accustomed to the low-stakes beat ‘em up antics of a superhero. Her death becomes a key part of the character's history moving forward; on the same level as Uncle Ben, even. In *#252*, written by Roger Stern and Tom DeFalco and penciled by Ron Frenz, Spider-Man dons his iconic black suit for the first time: an alien keepsake from an intergalactic crossover called the Secret Wars. In *#299* and *#300*, written by David Michelinie and drawn by Todd McFarlane, that black suit is revealed to

have bonded with Eddie Brock to become Venom: a character who would go on to become one of Spider-Man's most recognizable villains.

These developments are just as formative for the character, and they occur under several different creative teams at varying points of development in the long-running *Amazing Spider-Man* title. Once again, there is no quantitative designation for something being *iconic*; however, these are the stories that most inspire retelling, whether it be through other comic storylines later on or through adaptation in film and television. Such adaptations often combine the most memorable parts from multiple places in the character's history. For example, *Spider-Man*, directed by Sam Raimi and starring Tobey Maguire, draws on Peter Parker's origin, the early Green Goblin storylines regarding Peter's identity, and then the Green Goblin's demise following Gwen Stacy's death. However, rather than Gwen Stacy, the movie features Mary Jane Watson as Peter's love interest, setting both of them in high school. The film amalgamates many of these pieces of the Spider-Man mythos to create a product representative of Spider-Man: it does not draw from any single era precisely because the mythos is represented across many of them.

Furthermore, the film must be careful about which pieces of Spider-Man's story to incorporate out of sheer time limitation. Adapting any story is an act of translation between two mediums—in the case of adapting a widely successful comic book like *Spider-Man* to film, the magnitude of that translation is particularly relevant. A 122 minute run-time is hardly enough space to fit in every event in Peter Parker's life—at the moment of the film's release on May 9th, 2002, 480 issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* had been released—over 9000 pages of material in the main series alone, ignoring secondary series like *Sensational Spider-Man* or *Web of Spider-Man*. It stands to reason that the movie would need to condense crucial parts of this material into a

suitable size for the format. However, more than just the magnitude of material, the very narrative structures of the serialized comic book and the film are different. I wrote previously about the comic book's capacity to reconfigure the standard parts of classical Aristotelian story structure: its narrative status as a never-ending middle, with reduced importance placed on a beginning and hardly any end in sight. This is a property largely unique to the serialized comic book, and certainly not one any single film could really replicate. A *Spider-Man* movie (or any comic book movie, for that matter) must not only condense a plot down to a manageable size but also *distill* a conventionally singular story from the multiform, episodic comic book format.

With these challenges in mind, the 2002 *Spider-Man* movie's financial and critical success was remarkable. Box Office Mojo lists the opening weekend's box office numbers at \$114,844,116, making the superhero film the first movie to make \$100,000,000 in a single weekend. It would go on to gross \$821,708,551 worldwide, becoming the third most successful movie of the year, just trailing film franchise juggernauts *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*. Its success spawned two sequels (the aptly titled *Spider-Man 2* and *Spider-Man 3*), both of which found similar box-office success (grossing \$788,976,453 and \$894,983,373, respectively). Just like the first film's Green Goblin, the subsequent films picked out some of the wall-crawler's most prominent villains to face him on the silver screen. The second film sees Spider-Man face a more tragically sympathetic interpretation of Doctor Octopus (played by Alfred Molina), while the third pits the webslinger against both the Sandman (Thomas Haden Church) and Venom (Topher Grace). Across the trilogy, the story of Tobey Maguire's Peter Parker was expanded and developed, from a tumultuous relationship with Mary Jane to his own growth into a more mature and responsible

hero. The original Spider-Man films ended with *Spider-Man 3*, with a fourth one cancelled after creative differences between director Raimi and the studio.

The films were praised for adapting the character faithfully and translating many parts of early Spider-Man to film in new, dynamic ways. In a behind-the-scenes interview on the DVD release of *Spider-Man*, Sam Raimi noted that “what he did not want to do was reinvent the Spider-Man costume,” and that he “felt his job was more of a translation process. Working with Jim Acheson, [the costume designer on *Spider-Man*], what we wanted to do was bring the Spider-Man that the kids and the adults know to the big screen.” This process meant grounding certain aspects of the comic book character. In the film, Peter Parker’s costume is inspired by pro wrestling’s similarly outrageous getups—Raimi notes that “it was important to have real good justification where this crazy outfit came from.” Similarly, it was decided that “it didn’t feel proper to have a super stylized world, like a comic book world, like you see in a lot of comic book films ... I felt the most important thing to do was to create a real world” (*Spider-Man*). These decisions to ground the film and move it away from some of the more outlandish aspects of the source material were a conscious effort to further bridge the gap between the film and comic book medium. In terms of *Spider-Man*’s financial and critical success as a film franchise (particularly regarding the first two entries), these decisions were clearly fruitful; Raimi’s creative direction was key in making the films successful adaptations.

Yet, however successful the adaptations might have been, the natural constraints of the film medium ensured that they could not be *complete*. By the end of the trilogy, Tobey Maguire’s Peter Parker faces a total of four supervillains: an amount that the original *The Amazing Spider-Man* reached within five issues. This is hardly to diminish the films as standalone stories at all: each on-screen battle with those villains carried a far heavier emotional

weight than the original battles ever did by virtue of having an entire film dedicated to their development. Spider-Man's essence as a character may well have been captured in the films. However, Spider-Man's breadth as a mythos is something that inherently cannot be represented within a film's time and narrative constraints. Like the novel, a film production as a medium lacks the comic book's agility to navigate large amounts of material in a relatively short period of time. The character is too naturally multifaceted and expansive to be completely represented in any kind of traditional format. Instead, these films are *one* of the character's facets: an undeniably influential and part of the larger Spider-Man body of work, but one that will always only be a part of it.

The Amazing Spider-Man runs as a comic title today, keeping with the same continuous numbering as *The Amazing Spider-Man* did in its debut in 1963. Multiple limited series and sister series are often produced at the same time as the main line. *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* accompanied *Amazing* until the end of 2019, and before that *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man* ran as a lower stakes series from 2017 to 2018 concurrently. The character has appeared in no less than six films since 2016 (in no small part thanks to the Marvel Cinematic Universe) and been the starring title in half of them. The character's prominence in comics and pop culture is undeniable, and a large reason for that success is the original story's flexible comic book format. Various qualities of the character— whether it be his universality, his underdog nature, his atypicality, and so on— clearly gave the comic the capacity to reach the heights of success that it has now. However, the comic format is what most allowed that character to fully *realize* that capacity. Only in a format so often shared across creators would be able to test the upper limits of a character's adaptability; similarly, only a format with no definitive end would be able to explore just how *many* stories can be synthesized from the same mythos. Through

Spider-Man, the comic book format succeeds as an alternative storytelling medium on its own terms; not just as a viable one, but one that achieves things other formats simply would not be able to replicate. Because of the medium's shared narrative, Spider-Man stories will not stop so long as there is a creative team willing to tell more, and those stories will be as authentic as those told by Lee, Ditko, and Romita. While not every character shares the same meteoric success (indeed, most do not) Spider-Man as a case study showcases the heights that the serialized comic book can achieve: a format that excels in breadth of content and longevity, and one that can fully explore every facet of a character or narrative because of that breadth.

Chapter 3

One of the most striking things about the serialized comic book is its potential for longevity and pervasiveness. As previously mentioned, an extreme example is Spider-Man: the aforementioned *Amazing Spider-Man* has run for over 800 issues, and the character has featured in numerous other titles, television shows, and films. Decentralized narrative authority is key to the serialized comic book in not only its storytelling structure but in its longevity as well. And while there are few contemporary storytelling mediums that match that longevity, decentralized narratives themselves exist in much older forms. Mythmaking is one of them; as another medium untethered to any single author and perpetuated by a collective group, it bears striking similarities to the serialized comic book as we have discussed it. Both span a breadth of storytelling broader than any single narrative, and both are substantially composed of multiple iterations and interpretations of the same subjects. Just like comic books might reinvent or reorient a character to tell a certain story, many figures in a mythology play multiple roles depending on the story that they are in.

I plan to trace an overview of a character's mythos in Ancient Greek storytelling, then I will examine the ways that the same principles I have deemed core to serialized comic book storytelling (decentralized narrative authority, multiform storytelling, and malleable history) apply to the far more foundational context of the Ancient Greeks. In doing this, I hope to draw enough meaningful comparisons between modern serialized comic storytelling and the more ancient format to suggest that those same principles form a medium that can endure in a way that singular mediums cannot match.

Helen of Troy, as portrayed in Greek myth, poetry, and theater, particularly crystallizes the parallel between the modern serialized comic and ancient Greek storytelling. The character is

traditionally represented as she is portrayed in Homer's *Iliad*: the most beautiful woman in the world, the bride of Menelaus, and, infamously, the woman that began the Trojan War. More than anything else, Helen's place in that Trojan War myth is core to her character. Her reputation in that myth as the source of its bloodshed and tragedy echoes across every depiction of her in Greek tragedy. Even in works that don't center on the events of the Trojan War, like the *Odyssey* or *Helen*, her presence without fail centers on the part she plays in Troy's fall. Centuries later, in 1592, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* dubs her "the face that launched a thousand ships," a clear allusion to that same myth (XIII.88). In the same way that Spider-Man is referenced time and time again by the broad strokes of power, responsibility, and the proportionate powers of a spider, any instance of Helen (across centuries and mediums alike) is defined by that narrative core.

This narrative core unwaveringly focuses in some capacity on her culpability and guilt concerning the Trojan War. The *Iliad* (arguably the most complete surviving picture we have of Helen in the Trojan War) sees Helen voice her regret for eloping with Paris, declaring at one point that she is "so ashamed ... Death should have been a sweeter evil to me than following [Paris] here, leaving my home, [m]y marriage, my friends, my precious daughter, [t]hat lovely time in my life" (III.181-5). This codifies Helen's role in both the rest of the *Iliad* and general Greek myth: a woman in an affair who is trapped at the center of a cataclysmic conflict and forced to watch loved ones on both sides die because of her choices. The centrality of guilt is another commonality Helen shares with Peter Parker, narratively speaking; both the *Iliad* and Spider-Man's inaugural appearance in *Amazing Fantasy #15* bear witness to the dire consequences a character's mistake can yield—and if Helen is analogue to Peter, then the loss Trojan and Greek life alike are her Uncle Ben.

After the war, in Book IV of the *Odyssey*, Menelaus and Helen recall the events of the Trojan War, providing another window into what happened during the war via spoken memory. At a dinner with friends and comrades, Helen secretly slips a medicine that “make[s] one forget all sorrows...” so that “no tear [would] roll down [one’s] face, / not if his mother had died and his father died, not if men / murdered a brother or a beloved son in his presence” (IV.221-5). This allows the rest of the men to freely recall the events of Troy. At a glance, this is a testament to the grief and trauma that comes with such a grisly ten years war. However, the larger narrative of the Trojan War informs an otherwise innocuous episode of the epic: Odysseus (whom Telemachus is looking for) was a hero of the Trojan War, which leads everyone to reminisce about his exploits. The context of the Trojan War lends meaning to the fact that Helen is at the table at all; men who fought in the war would no doubt be aware that every life lost was the direct result of Helen’s actions.

Importantly, this is not all something that must be spelled out within the *Odyssey*. Rather, the Helen character and her surrounding mythos is implicit in her presence; she carries all the dramatic tension of her name and character with her without any additional exposition. That kind of implicit history is the same kind of storytelling that occurs in comic books. Drawing the material back to comic book conventions, the ability to reoccur in a larger narrative tapestry and carry over the same dramatic weight and momentum from another place is something common to both formats. In the *Odyssey* (and any number of works not necessarily centered on her) Helen engages in the same narrative mode that Spider-Man does: conveying her character’s story just by her appearance in it. Thanks to the same decentralized and multiform format, Helen is freed as a character, allowing her to develop in new ways outside of her original story.

Of course, at some point the audience is reminded of Helen's role in the Trojan War. when she recalls the time Odysseus slipped behind Troy's walls for information, she speaks about how her "heart had changed by now and was for going back home again, and [how] she grieved for the madness that Aphrodite bestowed when she led me there away from my own dear country, forsaking my own daughter, my bedchamber, and my husband, a man who lacked no endowment either or beauty" (IV.260-4). Ultimately, Helen keeps Odysseus' presence secret and allows the hero to gather intelligence and bring it back to the Greeks. For any unfamiliar with the myth (and, more likely, for the sake of storytelling completeness), Helen's recollection re-explains her position during the war. Importantly, this acts as a moment where the narrative can delve back into the character's past and mythos and clarify or reorient pieces of it. For one, this particular encounter did not take place in the *Iliad*; that is, at least the version we have compiled. Furthermore, exploits surrounding the Trojan Horse did not occur within the *Iliad* itself at all. The events of the Trojan War in its entirety are referenced across multiple works, not just the two most famous (remaining) Homeric epics. The enormity of the myth allows space for stories even in the past; it is simple enough to say something occurred during the war, even if that something might not have ever appeared in the stories original retelling.

This closely resembles a practice so often associated with serialized comic book storytelling. Retroactive continuity (commonly shortened as a verb into 'retcon') in comics is a hallmark of comic book storytelling—as previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the ability to manipulate an expansive body of history and tell new stories is key to the format's flexibility. Ancient Greek myth shares those same qualities that makes this sort of flexibility possible: the size of its history and breadth of material ensures that retroactive continuity is bound to happen. For example, in the *Iliad*, how much Aphrodite's divine intervention affects her culpability is

ambiguous. The goddess is the original reason that Paris meets Helen at all, and in the *Iliad* Helen decries the goddess for it. At one point in the epic, Aphrodite entreats Helen to join Paris in bed after combat; Helen lashes out:

You eerie thing, why do you love
Lying to me like this? Where are you taking me now?
Phrygia? Beautiful Maeonia? Another city
Where you have some other boyfriend for me?
Or is it because Menelaus, having just beaten Paris,
Wants to take his hateful wife back to his house
That you stand here now with treachery in your heart? (Homer III.427-33).

Helen clearly feels wronged by Aphrodite in both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*: the core narrative there has not changed. However, the *Iliad* leaves it unclear if Helen was merely persuaded by the goddess to run away with Paris or if she was under a kind of divine compulsion. When Helen rebukes Aphrodite by asking if she has “another city where you have some other boyfriend for me,” it suggests that Helen was drawn to Troy by an *offer* similar to that. Combined with her repeatedly voiced regret over her own decisions, the *Iliad* might ultimately suggest that Helen of Troy’s choices were exactly that: mistakes made by her which she must now shoulder the consequences of.

However, the *Odyssey*’s line referencing the same exchange between Helen and Aphrodite colors a different picture: one where the goddess bestows madness upon Helen, who realizes too late that the wool has been pulled over her eyes. Divine compulsion is brought up again in the same story, when Menelaus recalls that Helen made efforts to spoil the famous Trojan Horse by mimicking the Achaean soldiers’ wives, “moved by some divine spirit who

wished to grant glory to the Trojans” (IV.274-5). Curiously, this takes place *after* Helen insists that she had grown to regret her position and resolved to help Odysseus. An influence by “some divine spirit” might not only explain an inconsistency but shift some of the blame away from Helen onto Aphrodite. On the other hand, the different accounts of Helen’s allegiance might suggest a darker, more devious interpretation—that the accounts differ because Helen is attempting to mask her own guilt, and that she in fact might have been supporting the Trojans all the way through the Trojan Horse stratagem. Under either reading, the character’s interpretation is meaningfully affected by what is even a relatively minute retcon from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*.

Ultimately, picking at this particular discrepancy does not disrupt the overall Helen narrative. In the introduction to an edition of Euripides’ *Helen*, classicist William Allan discusses this dichotomy, noting that ultimately whatever Aphrodite’s role in Helen’s elopement, it “does not exonerate Helen; it is typically Greek to focus on the ramifications of an individual’s actions, and there is no doubt that Helen’s leaving Sparta had terrible consequences” (Allan 11). Whether it is the *Iliad*’s more straightforward, sympathetically regretful version of Helen or the more ambiguous and clever depiction in the *Odyssey*, the character remains recognizably the same. At the same time, the interpretive differences between even two Homeric texts introduces a multiformity to the character. The similarities that confirm both Helens as the same character allow both to be folded into the larger Helen mythos; in turn, that mythos is able to encompass both Helens for their differences as well.

In that same introduction, Allan notes that “[s]ince all myths are collective narratives, told by a variety of people for a variety of purposes, there can be no definitive version of any one myth.” At the same time, however varied they might be, each of these instances of Helen still connects her to a “basic story ([Helen’s] role in the fall of Troy, the defining episode of her life)

which it is the poet's (or artist's) task to recreate in as compelling a manner as s/he can" (Allan 10). There is a tension between the myth's capacity for variation and the unchanging core story at its root: finding the strongest middle ground between these poles was the challenge for ancient Greek storytellers. Allan names multiple different interpretations alongside the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, such as a "cosmic figure created by Zeus to destroy the race of heroes" in the *Cypria*, a "goddess who confers beauty upon girls at Sparta" in Herodotus, and a poor young woman "led astray" whose "basic sense of duty to her family was upset by Aphrodite" (13). These are all recognizable offshoots and developments of the woman who started the Trojan War: however, the character carries multitudes of directions and angles on that core concept that are all equally valid as they are told by a variety of storytellers throughout the years.

This very closely echoes the balancing act established by serialized comic book storytelling. Helen and Spider-Man alike are both tied to a longstanding concrete continuity and open to interpretation and reinvention. They are defined as characters by certain characteristics and storytelling boundaries, but have the plasticity to change and adapt to different narratives as time passes and different artists tell stories with them. And, much like serialized comic book storytelling, the larger body of work that represents ancient Greek myth encompasses stories told through many works, spread out across different time periods, authors, and even mediums. In a sense, this system of mythic storytelling is the logical conclusion of decentralized narrative authority. Even in the Homeric epics like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, there is evidence that suggests Homer was in fact not a single person, but a stand-in for a plurality of storytellers all participating in the oral epic tradition.

And if the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* offer a glimpse at the capacity for multiformity and interpretation retroactive continuity in ancient storytelling, Euripides' *Helen* boldly tests the

upper limit of that capacity. The play, at its core, massively retcons to the Trojan War myth, revealing that the titular Helen was never actually present for the war's events at all. Instead, following the argument between Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera—where Paris selected Aphrodite and was awarded Helen as a prize—Helen was replaced with a “a breathing phantom which [Hera] had molded in my likeness from heavenly ether” (Helen 34-5). Helen of Troy is never at Troy at all, and while a facsimile carries out her role in the Trojan War, the real Helen goes to live with Proteus in Egypt.

This is obviously a marked departure from the traditional story codified by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—one that, at a glance, seems to downright dispute the story told in those appearances by Helen before. The ambiguity of Aphrodite's role in Helen's elopement is trivial compared to the magnitude of retroactive continuity that the Helen phantom brings to the table. Like with comics, decentralized narrative authority allows this interpretation to speak to the core character in a way interpretations cannot in other mediums. *Helen* does the same thing that many plot twists, retcons, and revelations do in today's comics: its core idea transforms the audience's perception of a familiar myth by claiming past events occurred differently. In doing so, *Helen* offers a new avenue to develop the character that would otherwise be impossible.

Crucially, however different it might be, the plot still centers on Helen's role (or, in the play, her supposed role) in the downfall of Troy: and, by keeping in line with that core spirit of the character, *Helen* is able to meaningfully contribute to the Helen mythos. Moreover, the same tension between departure from familiarity and remaining true to the myth that Allan alludes to earlier holds true. To work, the story cannot just generate novelty for novelty's sake; in order to contribute to the mythos, it must draw on it.

Allan notes that Euripides is not the only Greek storyteller to posit that Helen never went to Troy: Herodotus and Stesichorus both have similar alternative accounts of the Trojan myth. However, he warns the reader that historians only have access to “droplets from the large stream of Greek myth, and although it is tempting to make connections between them, we can never be sure if they are as significant as they seem” (Allan 18). As such, we cannot assume with certainty that any of them are directly related to one another, nor can we be sure how radical this development was in the grand scheme of Greek mythology. However, with the texts available to us now, Helen and her phantom double are serious shifts from the existing narrative, and one of the most overt instances of retroactive continuity in Greek myth. When discussing how far from the original Trojan myth the new Helen-absent narratives are, Allan writes:

Greek myths are not only protean (to suit the needs and purposes of the ever-changing society that produces them), but also remarkably cohesive, as poets strive to integrate their innovations within a wider framework, thereby boosting the authority and credibility of their particular versions. The very unorthodoxy of the alternative Helen (the heroine is an exemplary wife, not an adulteress; she went to Egypt, not to Troy; etc.) has often obscured the pervasive continuity that exists between the ‘new’ versions and the canonical tradition they depart from. Yet such creative intertextuality is fundamental to Greek myth and thus to Greek poetry of all periods. (Allan 18).

This passage makes the link between the modern serialized comic book and ancient storytelling more overt. Here, Allan describes Greek myth as a shapeshifting body that changes with the times and society and surrounding it. In this sense, stretching across hundreds of years, the Greek body of myth is a grand-scale picture of the same development trajectory that serialized comics went through from the 1940’s through to now. The same transformations occur

over time in comics, which, as we have established, very much changed with the times to appeal to an ever-changing demographic. In the 1960's and 1970's, a college-age Spider-Man intersects with college protests against the Vietnam War, redoubled suspicion of politicians, and black resistance against systemic racism. In the 1990's, much of entertainment had grown to match a more cynical readership, and storytelling grew darker and more self-serious, with more hyper-stylized musculatures and testosterone than ever. By the present day, comics tackle both new social issues and old ones that still prove relevant: diversity, underrepresented perspectives, and systemic discontent are foregrounded in many modern stories, alongside a savvy that comes with a broader demographic than ever. On a much, much larger scale, Allan's passage discussing Greek myth alludes to the same kind of reactive mutability.

Furthermore, the "wider framework" that poets integrate their innovations into (and its "remarkable cohesion") closely resemble the more well-defined concept of comics continuity. Ancient myth was necessarily more disparate—they were not publishing entities with the goal of pushing out the latest episode in a mythic serial. Indeed, using a term like retcon to describe something in ancient myth is inherently anachronistic. The very connotation of modern continuity (and the guiding authorial hand that comes with) does not quite apply to a format as nuanced and ancient as myth. However, the distinct body that emerged from building up these interconnected stories with recurring figures across them is undoubtedly a continuity of sorts. The "pervasive continuity that exists between 'new' versions and the canonical tradition they depart from" is functionally similar to the comic book universe in many ways; it serves as a larger encompassing source of material for new stories by providing a foundation to both build upon and move away from. This proto-continuity, while unconcerned with many of the quibbles and details that modern continuity is often defined by, most definitely resembles the layout of

serialized comics: a solid nucleus of core continuity (as mentioned before, “what definitively happened,”) surrounded by a more changeable, protean body that can adjust itself to suit an audience. The “creative intertextuality” Allan calls “fundamental to Greek myth and thus to Greek poetry of all periods” is what connects individual works like *Helen* to the larger mythos of character that exists in all works prior (18).

In fact, that intertextuality is what allows a work like *Helen* to exist at all: such works are inseparable from the continuity they draw upon because they rely on continuation and differentiation from the existing story to achieve narrative lift. As Allan writes, the task for a storyteller like Euripides is “to create a new angle on a familiar story” (25). Like comics continuity, myths still have a base structure that is integral to that story’s core identity. Although the mediums give leeway and breathing room for new artists to take their own liberties, they are also closely and undeniably tied to the stories told before. And while we must be careful not to overstep and infer direct connections between works when the surviving body of Greek writing is incomplete, there are still pieces that fit together in that overarching Helen framework.

In the same introduction, Allan delves into the *Palinode*: Stesichorus’s refutation of the traditional Helen narrative and “one of the most radical and revealing examples of myth revision in early Greek poetry” (19). Most importantly, three lines in the poem by Stesichorus (as recalled in Plato’s *Phaedrus*) declare that:

It is not true, this account:

You did not go on well-benched ships,

Nor did you reach the towers of Troy.

Allan observes that “[t]wo of the most striking features of Euripides’ plot—Helen’s presence in Egypt and her phantom double’s at Troy— seem to have been part of Stesichorus’

account” (20). Even if we cannot confidently claim that Euripides drew direct inspiration from Stesichorus, the similarities (alongside Stesichorus’ definitely older work) all but rule out *Helen*’s plot as a novel invention out of the blue. Even if Euripides did not consciously draw on Stesichorus, there must have been some conception of the Helen-absent plot that Stesichorus references. And, by connecting Euripides’ innovations to an even older work, Allan lays out a loose linear structure between works involving Helen that is analogous to serialized storytelling. The comparison is not perfect, and the resulting line connecting work to work is even looser, with less direct connective tissue between each. Crucially, however, the timeline provides a trackable continuity: a framework through which audiences might be able to navigate interpretations within the Helen mythos. Rather than a never-ending linear narrative, this continuity tracks the general development of that mythos: not unlike a comic book character, each version of the character is incorporated and accumulated into a larger whole.

Looking at the *Helen* story itself within the play, there are other, smaller pieces that resemble the comic book as a format. Off the bat, the story begins with Helen’s monologue explaining the situation thus far: her first line draws attention to “the streams of the Nile, the river of fair virgin nymphs” to establish her presence in Egypt, and she quickly announces that, “[a]s for [herself, her] fatherland is no obscure place. It is Sparta, and my father is Tyndareos” (1, 6-7). Notably, this serves to both immediately cue audiences that this is a very familiar character (the titular Helen) and that this current story is a much less familiar one. Helen’s explanation of prior events both situates her temporally (when this play might take place in the larger Trojan War narrative) and, more importantly, immediately establishes the existence of the Helen phantom, which signals to the audience that the Helen stories they might be familiar with are *untrue*.

These are all developments that occur *before* the events of *Helen*: they are not part of the play's core narrative, but the ground on which that narrative stands. Simply speaking, the audience is being thrown into a revised Trojan War myth *in media res*: Helen must spend the first pages of the play recapping precisely because there are events to recap. In our discussion of comics, I established early on that one key aspect of the serialized comic book (and the absurd extent to which it can be serialized) is that it begins to bend basic Aristotelian storytelling structure: there is a distant beginning, a perpetual middle, and no end in sight. To this end, they almost always feature a recap page of their own to accompany titles and authors. Spider-Man comics will usually include a page that both lets readers know that "Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider and given the proportional speed, strength, and agility of a spider ..." and catches them up on what immediate events are going on at the beginning of the issue. The shared presence of a "recap page" in *Helen* suggests pseudo-episodic storytelling along those same lines—setting the story up not just as a standalone work, but as an entry with ramifications in a larger world.

And, with the Trojan War myth as large and central as it is, there are plenty of allusions to that larger world within *Helen*. If Helen's opening monologue is the 'recap page,' then it is followed with what could only be described as a guest-appearance from Teucer: an Achaean archer seen in a minor capacity in the *Iliad*. Teucer serves to mostly further establish the world that the play takes place in: he gives Helen an overview of what has transpired in the war since she hid away in Egypt. In the process, the audience receives references to several other heroes from the Trojan War, including Achilles, Ajax, and (of course) Menelaus—Helen's husband. Teucer makes concrete nods to Achilles' death and the ensuing conflict over his armor, as well as Ajax's tragic end because of it. This kind of 'cameo' does not directly service the plot at hand,

necessarily: instead, it connects *Helen* to the larger myth. Moreover, rather than the immediate plot, the cameo furthers that *myth*: the myth of the Trojan War, which now (if Euripides is successful) will fold *Helen* into its body of stories. Like Daredevil appearing in an issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, Teucer's early appearance works to cement the work (*Helen*, in this case) alongside stories set in the same continuity. In doing so, it lends *Helen* authenticity: giving it the same credibility and canonicity as the stories surrounding Ajax and Achilles.

In fact, all of these aspects of the play that connect *Helen* to the larger body of myth are in turn the real connection to comic storytelling. The rest of the play sees her reuniting with Menelaus and ultimately fleeing Egypt to live happily with him back in Sparta. And while after the initial retcon events play out relatively typically, the ramifications of those changes go a long way in transforming the mythos—or, at least, offering a viable alternative to fold into the sum plurality of that mythos.

Like comics, this plurality is the source of the character's capacity for interpretation. Each storyteller brings their own narrative voice to the table when they tell the story of the character, and the decentralized narrative authority central to both mediums allows each voice to contribute and become a part of that character's greater mythos. Furthermore, the universality of such mythic characters mean that the range for interpretation is much wider than other mediums can offer. Allan writes that “[m]ythical innovation and even explicit disagreement with previous versions are standard features of Greek poetry” (25). The characters are never ‘completed,’ and there is always room for new developments and innovations.

That same innovation rooted in change is a hallmark of comic book storytelling. The Helen phantom is, in all practicality, a clone: one that serves the same purpose as any clone in pulp science fiction or comic books would. Concepts like time travel and clones are employed to

justify changing or maintain the status quo in the context of continuity. Such devices allow for the ever-building story to loop back on itself and adjust its past events even as the story never stops moving forward. Under the more concrete framework of comics continuity, this can be even more tumultuous for comic book storytelling. After all, comics continuity has all “*happened,*” in a way that is more defined than ancient myth; and the more important the event, the more extreme external circumstances would need to be to change the record.

Oftentimes, this can lead to developments that stretch the audience's suspension of disbelief, or that invoke novelty for novelty's sake. In the particularly maligned *Spider-Man* storyline “One More Day,” the devil figure Mephisto himself is called upon to undo Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane after editorial mandates decided that the character would be more marketable single. As touched on in Chapter 1, the Clone Saga posits the question of whether or not the Spider-Man audiences have been following is actually a clone of the true Peter Parker: a supposed genetic clone named Ben Reilly. This question hung unanswered in a story that lasted almost a year, wearing on audiences' patience and achieving little by the end of the story, ending with the same Peter Parker from the beginning of the storyline as the true version and with Ben Reilly as a perfect clone but separate character who would reappear in subsequent storylines. However successful they might be, these changes draw on the same capacity to retroactively change and adapt that ancient myth does. Furthermore, such developments are ultimately added to the accumulated history of the character, whether such changes ultimately become core to that history or not. Should a writer poke fun at the Peter Parker's erased marriage or reference his famous misfortune with clones, they still draw on that same ever-evolving accumulated history.

Moreover, Euripides' play is not only a continuation of the myth, but also an adaptation of that myth onto the stage. Though we touched earlier on Stesichorus and Herodotus and the likelihood that Euripides was drawing on existing innovation, the nature of direct adaptation is another dimension of multiformity in ancient Greek storytelling and how it resembles comics today. Comic book properties are adapted to the stage quite often today: we have already mentioned and discussed various successful superhero movies and how they remain in conversation with comics both before and after they are made. The *Spider-Man* movies have impacted the Spider-Man comics just as much as they have drawn from them. Euripides' *Helen* expands the Helen body of work through a different medium in the same way. In interacting with the history of the character and myth and actively adapting it into a different format, *Helen* parallels comic storytelling and its multiformity in an additional dimension. With that additional dimension, accumulated history becomes that larger overarching mythos that spans stories and mediums. Helen and Spider-Man, different as they may be on paper, are alike in this way: rooted in this tradition of interpretation and decentralized narrative authority, they transcend singular storytelling as a larger encompassing body of work.

And, in doing so, they highlight the core similarity connecting ancient Greek myth to serialized comic book storytelling. *Helen* is only one of the most prominent examples of myth's ability to be revisited, retold, and re-contextualized, and while it is one of the most extreme cases, it is far from the only one. In fact, Greek myth and storytelling is one of the storytelling mediums that actually surpasses the serialized comic book in multiplicity and storytelling fluidity. However, that same multiplicity is undoubtedly the same kind that exists now in comics. That same core of decentralized narrative authority, multiform storytelling, and malleable history that allowed ancient Greek myth to persist for centuries is now at work in serialized comic book

storytelling. More than any particular subject matter or any individual writer or character, the very format of the modern serialized comic book is the source of the medium's longevity. In echoing such a longstanding and persisting body like Ancient Greek myth (one that encompasses multiple mediums within it, no less), the comic book medium becomes a sort of new mythmaking. Comics are often looked at as a kind of modern myth for their larger than life characters and stories centered on epic heroic exploits: however, the commonality is more foundational than that. The very capacity for growth and change, rooted in fundamental qualities like decentralized narrative authority, give the comic book the same capacity for cultural immortalization that ancient Greek myth did before it. And although the rarefied, heightened nature of such old myth seems a far cry from the low-culture roots of the modern comic book, the result is one and the same.

Comic book culture today has hit an apex of relevance and popularity. Perhaps most notably, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has taken the silver screen by storm. A cinematic attempt to more closely replicate the way the serialized comic book is structured, the franchise (often abbreviated as MCU) is founded on the same kind of sprawling, decentralized narrative that its source material is known for. Beginning in 2008 with *Iron Man*, the franchise pioneered the idea of having characters leading their own smaller franchises (like the Iron Man trilogy) while also crossing over and connecting with other films in a singular continuity. The arcs and plots that Tony Stark deals with as Iron Man in his own films inform the character across all of his appearances—Iron Man's appearance in 2012's *Avengers* take place after his developments in *Iron Man 2*, and the events of *Avengers* in turn directly influence his actions in *Iron Man 3*. The film format is fundamentally different from that of a serialized comic book: its length, production value, and resource investment mean that a proper movie will almost always carry

more narrative weight than a single 24-page comic issue. Because of this, a conventional series of films can only cover so much material and remain coherent, and the end product is more narratively linear. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is not revolutionary for adapting comic book characters; it is revolutionary for adapting the comic book format. Furthermore, in doing so, the universe engages in the same mythmaking spirit that comics and ancient myth have in common.

And that tactic has paid massive dividends: the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the most successful single film franchise ever: with twenty-three big budget blockbusters grossing a collective \$22.5 billion in the last twelve years. *Avengers: Endgame* is the highest grossing movie of all time: a finale to a saga twenty-one movies in the making, featuring exclusively characters whose stories have been told in other movies and resolving plot arcs across those multiple movies. The MCU has achieved clear success and pop-culture prominence—and, ultimately, that is because the source material itself (comics) are a mythic tradition. The films tap into the source material on the same level that ancient playwrights would have tapped into myth: condensing and crystallizing multiform stories and characters into a coherent adaptation fit for a stage. As with the Spider-Man films, these movies do not replace the comics, nor do they seek to contain the vast multifaceted history of the comics in just under two or three hours. Rather, like Helen's portrayal in Euripides' *Helen*, the characters and stories in the MCU are just another facet of a very fluid, mutable source. The MCU just sets itself apart from other superhero films because of its closer formal resemblance to the serialized comic book itself. In that sense, it both acts as a part of a larger mythic whole and imitates the structure of that larger mythic whole in its own storytelling. The MCU's success parallels the explosion of popularity interconnected superhero comics had themselves—including any skepticism regarding its status as mindlessly flashy and low-brow entertainment.

Nevertheless, like *Helen*, the films all fold into the larger comic mythmaking that spans all those stories and mediums. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has found success because its source material is *built* for extended, decentralized storytelling. Serialized comics as modern mythmaking account for both the medium's inherent longevity and its ability to smoothly adapt to other formats. The success of the modern superhero movie is an extension of modern comics mythmaking. The key principles of the serialized comic book (decentralized narrative authority, multiform storytelling, and malleable history) that set the medium apart from other forms of storytelling are also what draw it so close to the mythmaking tradition. Amidst the variety of storytelling genres present today, the serialized comic book, from its low-brow roots to its massive modern pop cultural appeal, is far from a generational fad. Rather, the aspects of the medium that make it so different from other literary forms (and so amenable to widespread production and consumption in pop-culture) are what make the serialized comic book akin to myth more than any of those other formats.

Serialized comics *are* a new format of mythmaking; we can expect Spider-Man and Superman to go away no more than we can expect Helen or Zeus: with no centralized narrative authority, nothing stops these characters from occurring and reoccurring in stories forever: ultimately, creating a body of work with the inherent ability to be passed down and iterated upon indefinitely and a consequently infinite capacity for storytelling.

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