

KAPOW!!

SUPERHERO ORIGINS

A330 BLOCK 2

ZAP!



THINK OF SOME TWENTIETH CENTURY SUPERHEROES...



- Where do their powers come from?
- What are their weaknesses?
- Who are their enemies?
- Can you detect any common themes?



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DISCUSSION

- The superhero can be seen as a reflection of twentieth century concerns (and sometimes excitement) about new technology, and about the changing relationship between man and the universe.
- This is a simplistic analysis of a complex cultural phenomenon, but it allows us to look at the construction of fictional heroes as a commentary on social concerns – and this perspective can be usefully applied to Greek and Roman heroes.



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GREEK HEROES



- Some of the earliest heroes (think of Jason, Hercules, Perseus, Theseus) were notable for their response to supernatural ‘challenges’, usually involving monsters.
- They took on challenges to gain rewards; while a sense of duty was sometimes involved, it was rarely the primary motivation.
- These monster-battling heroes illustrated concerns of the time, about dangerous and unexplained natural phenomena which no ordinary man could handle.

GREEK TRAGEDY

- Later the Greek tragedians questioned the role of the hero within the family; Theseus' family falls apart, Jason leaves Medea with tragic consequences, and Hercules kills his wife. The suggestion is that heroes, because they are not ordinary men, cannot have the family lives of ordinary men.
- The tragedians encourage us to ask whether heroes actually make dependable men: their heroism consists of a series of independent acts, so they do not function well within society.





MOVING ON TO ROME...

- In the wake of generations of civil war, Roman writers of the early Augustan era were looking for a new type of hero, a dependable hero and a leader to be trusted. They wanted a hero who could fight monsters and lead men – but who, unlike Odysseus or Achilles, would bring his men safely home to a land of peace.
- Such a hero was developed with great success by Virgil; but before Aeneas became the prototype Roman hero, Livy tried his hand at creating some.

LIVY, BOOK 7: MANLIUS AND THE GAUL

- Then a Gaul of enormous size proceeded onto the empty bridge, and in the loudest voice he could, shouted, ‘Let the bravest man that Rome can produce come here and fight me, so that the result will show which of our nations is greater in war’. The young Roman nobility were silent for a long time, ashamed to refuse the challenge but unwilling to seek the first post of danger. Then Titus Manlius, son of Lucius, the one who freed his father from the persecution of the tribune, advanced from his station to the dictator and said, ‘General, I would on no account leave my post to fight without your orders, even if I should see a certain prospect of victory; but if you permit me, I wish to show that beast, who makes such an insolent parade in the front of the enemy’s army, that I come from that family which beat down an army of Gauls from the Tarpeian Rock’.
- The dictator answered, ‘Titus Manlius, I honour your bravery and your dutiful regard for your father and your country. Go, and with the help of the gods, show them that Rome is invincible’. The young man was then armed by his companions, took an infantry shield, and buckled on a Spanish sword, suitable for close fighting.



- As soon as they had fitted on his armour, they led him out towards the Gaul, who showed a savage joy and who (the ancients have considered even this worth mentioning) was sticking out his tongue in mockery. They then went back to their posts, and the two champions were left in the middle space, in the manner of a spectacle rather than according to the rules of combat, very unequally matched, in the eyes of those who judged by appearances. One had a body of enormous size, glittering in a shirt of various colours, with armour plated and inlaid with gold; the other was of medium height and build, with weapons chosen for ready use more than for show. On his side there was no song of defiance, no exultation or vain waving of weapons, but his heart, full of determination and silent rage, reserved all its fierceness for the contest.
- They took their ground between the two armies, while the minds of such great numbers of men on both sides were suspended between hope and fear. The Gaul, like some huge mass, ready to crush his opponent, stretching forward his shield with his left hand, struck a glancing blow with the edge of his sword on the armour of the approaching Manlius, making a great noise; while the Roman pushing aside the lower part of his opponent's shield with his own, and squeezing himself in between that and his body, closed in with him in such a way as to be in no danger of a wound. Then with one, then another blow, piercing his stomach, the enemy fell, stretched across an enormous area of ground. Without mutilating the body of his fallen enemy, Manlius took one torque which, though spattered with blood, he put around his own neck.
- Astonishment and dismay held the Gauls motionless. The Romans in excitement advanced from their posts to meet their champion, and with congratulations and praises led him to the dictator. Among the rough jokes that they made, according to the custom of soldiers, the name Torquatus was heard joined to his name, and since then the name has done honour to all his descendants. The dictator also presented him with a golden crown and in a public speech praised his actions in the highest possible terms.

LIVY AND QUADRIGARIUS

- Livy's Manlius is a constructed exemplar, a model Roman for his readers to copy. This is supposedly 'history', but is actually a highly embroidered version of a single story from the early annalist Claudius Quadrigarius. A comparison with Quadrigarius' version shows how much Livy has changed and added.



QUADRIGARIUS

- Then a certain Gaul came forward, unprotected except for a shield and two swords, and adorned with a torque and armbands, who was above all others in strength and size and youth and courage. When the battle was under way, with both sides fighting savagely, he signalled with a wave of his hand that the fighting should stop. There was a pause in the battle. As soon as silence fell, he shouted in a loud voice that if anyone wished to fight with him, they should come forward. No-one dared because of his immense size. Then the Gaul began to laugh and stick out his tongue. This was suddenly taken to heart by a certain Titus Manlius, of noble birth, who could not bear such a disgrace to happen to the Romans, that no-one would come forward from so great an army. He, as I say, stepped forward, and did not allow Roman courage to be stolen so disgracefully by the Gaul.
- Having put on an infantry shield and a Spanish sword, he stood against the Gaul. That meeting was made on the bridge itself, with both armies looking on in great fear. There, as I said before, they stood: the Gaul, true to his training, held out his shield, prepared to wait; Manlius, trusting his heart more than his skill, hit the shield with his shield and threw the Gaul into a state of confusion. While the Gaul tried to regain his position, Manlius again struck shield with shield, and again drove the man from his position; in the same movement his sword went under the Gaul's, and the Spanish sword drained the blood from his chest; then immediately in his withdrawal he opened up the Gaul's right shoulder, and did not give way at all until he had overthrown him, in case the Gaul should get in a lucky blow. When he killed him he cut off his head, removed his torque and placed it, dripping blood, around his own neck. From this deed he and his descendants got the name 'Torquatus'.



DISCUSSION

- Livy and Virgil have created very similar heroes. Both writers are attempting to fill the holes in Greek heroism by constructing a dependable, dutiful hero who could act as a role model for the ordinary man.
- The Roman hero illustrates Roman concerns over the relationship between the individual and the State, which were particularly prominent in the years of the late Republic and early Empire.
- The Roman hero (whether Aeneas, Manlius, or one of Livy's many other heroes) exemplifies the virtue of *pietas*. They are not always uncomplicated exemplars (Aeneas' killing of Turnus, for instance, at the end of the *Aeneid* complicates his characterisation), but their sense of obligation to their heritage always comes through.