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Comics as Folklore

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COMIC BOOKS ARE NOT FOLKLORE. Or at least they don't qualify as such if we understand folklore according to traditional academic definitions that foreground the dynamics of unmediated human interaction. Nonetheless, writers both inside and outside the discipline of folkloristics have different ideas about what folklore is. This chapter, then, will take a look at some of those ideas, building toward an understanding of the folkloresque in an environment where traditional folklore coexists with the folkloresque in contemporary American culture. The medium of comic books presents too vast an array of possibilities to examine in a single chapter. For the present purposes, I have chosen to look at Superman as an exemplar of the super-hero genre in comics. His genesis and the role ascribed to him by scholars have led to situations where writers find it useful to refer to him as folklore.

The relationship between folklore and technologically mediated forms of storytelling such as comic books is complicated. Each exists on its own terms while simultaneously incorporating elements of the other. Superman presents an interesting case because, regardless of the influences that led to his creation, he existed originally in comic books and newspaper strips. Whereas much folklore does not financially benefit the performer, creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were very much interested in the commercial possibilities of Superman, going so far as to sketch out what the character might look like on a cereal box (Daniels 1998, 28–30). It is the commercial nature of the character—that he can be found on cereal boxes, in movies and television, on lunch boxes and pajamas—that enabled him to stake a claim to a portion of the larger American cultural landscape. As people, including scholars, work toward understanding the role of the medium of comic books and the superheroes that came to dominate their pages, they

called upon other, more readily comprehensible aspects of culture, such as folklore. Thus Superman fits well into a discussion of the rhetoric of the folkloresque. In this chapter, the various ways that Superman and comic books have been understood as folklore will build toward an understanding of the interaction between folklore and popular culture. Popular culture does not just operate in a folkloresque mode; it can become folklore.

THE FOLKLORESQUE SUPERMAN

Superman[1] stories fit within the framework of the folkloresque and have done so since the character's genesis. Jerry Siegel's own claim about the conception of Superman—that he stayed awake one night circa 1933, imagining a strong man in the vein of Samson and Hercules—shows us that he had something like integration in mind, resembling the fuzzy allusions and cobbled-together qualities of the folkloresque described by Michael Foster earlier in this volume. Siegel wanted to create a folk hero, though not by following any single tradition (Steranko 1970, 37–39), which is often how the folkloresque integration of folklore into popular culture works. Though the form of a comic book is not precisely the same as oral tradition, we will see below that many writers perceive remarkable similarities between the two. To demonstrate how Superman comics integrate folklore, it's best to begin with some good old-fashioned motif spotting (Koven 2008). Drawing from Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*[2] (Thompson 1955–1958), Ronald Baker writes of Superman's origin in terms of hero tales, and he points out many traditional motifs: L111.2, Foundling hero; L111.2.1, Future hero found in boat; N825.1, Childless old couple adopt hero; D1540, Magic invulnerability; and Z312, Unique deadly weapon, only one thing will kill a certain man (Baker 1975, 174).

Two specific Superman stories from different decades demonstrate that folkloric motifs can be found beyond the character's origin. I have chosen these because their integration of folklore is readily apparent. In the earlier story, "The Lady and the Lion" (Binder and Boring 2005), Superman drinks a potion created by Circe—diegetically the same Circe from *The Odyssey*—which transforms him into a lion-man. We find in this tale motifs D110, Transformation of man to wild beast (mammal) and D1040, Magic drink. The characters also see a play based on "Beauty and the Beast" (ATU 425C).[3] The more recent series *Absolute All-Star Superman* (Morrison and Quitely 2010) is useful to examine because it incorporates folklore in several different ways. Its writer, Grant Morrison, states his intentions clearly: "Saddled with this slightly odd and archaic title, [penciler Frank] Quitely and

I decided to make it literal and to tell the story of Superman as star, or solar 'deity,' hence our opening shot of Superman framed by solar flares and the structure of the story which traverses one epic 'day'—dipping below the horizon in issue six so that Superman, like all good solar myth heroes, can journey through midwinter's longest Night and the upside-down under-world before rising again in issue nine, revitalized" (Morrison and Quitely 2010).[4] Mythical figures Samson and Atlas show up as foils for Superman in issue 3. Morrison modeled the overarching plot for this series on the twelve labors of Hercules, stating as much himself and going so far as to list them for readers. Furthermore, issue 2 of *All-Star Superman*, "Superman's Forbidden Room," bears an unmistakable resemblance to ATU311/Motif C611 with its reference to a forbidden chamber and the common story in which that motif appears: ATU312—Bluebeard.

Immediately we see that Superman comic books from a variety of eras exhibit a folkloresque integration of folkloric motifs and tale types as part of their never-ending narratives. Writers have also created "folkloric" material within Superman narratives to flesh out the character's backstory. Over the course of Superman's publication history, writers and editors have invented written languages for Superman's home planet along with planetary and cultural history. Elements of that history correspond to many of the traditional genres of folklore. The story "Awake in the Dark" (Simone and Byrne 2006), for example, features a Kryptonian mother telling what seems to be a fairy tale to her son at bedtime. The cover includes the text, "Once upon a time in Krypton" to further the folkloresque depiction of Kryptonian culture. The writers integrate this invented folklore into their stories.

Superman comics have been successful in part because they employ materials resembling folklore. This allows readers to find something that feels familiar and thus draws them into the story. We might consider Superman's superhuman strength outlandish, but it fits within the larger tradition of strong men and becomes acceptable in that context. There might be something to say about the result of the inclusion of specific tale types and motifs (i.e., what Superman identifying with the Beast implies about his relationship with Lois Lane), but this isn't the place to conduct such analysis. Instead, I want to dig into the perception of Superman comics—and comics in general—as folklore.

THE FOLKLORISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON COMIC BOOKS

In an article titled "Print and American Folktales," Richard Dorson discusses the dissemination of oral narrative in American history: "One

especial difference, the influence of printing in American life, upsets cherished convictions and established methods of the folklorist. For the ubiquitous printed page becomes an instrument to diffuse and a tablet to record folk tales. Stories in the United States travel interchangeably through the spoken and the printed word; if communities are scattered and fluid and culturally advanced beyond the cement of purely oral tradition, a cohesive force is supplied by commonly read printed matter" (Dorson 1945, 207–8). In recognizing the relationship between oral and technologically produced culture, Dorson sets the tone for the discussion of comics as folkloresque.

Dorson mentions newspapers, weekly magazines, regional periodicals, popular humor publications, local history, and literature itself—but not comic books, though he was writing when comics were at their peak circulation. Folklorists all but ignored comic books before the 1970s. Alex Scobie (1980, 71) enumerates some reasons why: disciplinary dogma, prejudice, lack of availability—all of which concerns are vanishing or nonexistent now.

Five years after Dorson's article, *Southern Folklore Quarterly* published an article by Paul G. Brewster that explores some folkloric motifs and tale types (without reference to the indexes) that appear in comics. Brewster (1950, 97) sets his work within the context of other studies that explore folklore in "more serious art." He finds folklore in a variety of comics; in Superman he sees magical transformation as the operative motif.[5] Brewster's analysis goes no further than identifying folkloric elements. Two years later, in the same journal, Grace Partridge Smith gives a more judgmental analysis. Confining her attention to newspaper strips—humorous ones, not Superman—she opens by arguing that a comic adaptation of a folktale "not only debases the materials of our discipline but also threatens the cultural background of the child" (Smith 1952, 124). She condemns the manner in which the cartoonists stop at nothing in their quest to keep their readers' attention. In the process, she notes some adaptations of specific stories, such as "Cinderella" and the "Pied Piper."

Several folklorists in the 1970s turned their attention to comics. Ellen Rhoads focuses on *Little Orphan Annie*. She conceptualizes comics as folklore and studies them through the method of structuralism—a theory often applied to folklore. Early on, Rhoads includes a quotation by the German literary scholars Reitberger and Fuchs that echoes much of what we have seen regarding the role of comic books: "Comics, together with the other mass media, are a substitute for genuine folklore and culture and have developed into a self-perpetuating institution, and integral part of the American Way of Life" (Rhoads 1973, 346; Rolf Brednich makes the same reference,

see below). Rhoads, whose study of *Little Orphan Annie* comics appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore,* considers the words of these scholars as enough to go on when labeling comics as folklore: "As mentioned above, comics constitute a form of folklore, a view shared by Lerner" (346). It's worth noting that neither Lerner nor Reitberger and Fuchs are folklorists. Rhoads makes no attempt to interrogate these statements, nor does she have to; the emic notion of a form as folkloric can be enough for a folklorist to use. Rhoads doesn't return to the notion of how comics might resemble folklore, but it is implicit in her analysis.

Ronald L. Baker's 1975 study places comics within the context of a declining oral tradition and the rise in popularity of dime novels and other mass forms of entertainment. For Baker, comics have replaced *märchen.* He characterizes the hero of the märchen as "unpromising" and "unassuming," and sees the same sort of character in superhero comics. He discusses many of the folk narrative motifs that show up in superhero stories in general, and in Superman stories in particular. Baker's conclusion, however, points to differences between folk tales and superhero stories. Whereas märchen show us ways that limitations can be overcome, according to Baker, "contemporary comic books provide little psychological release from our limitations; they simply reinforce our hangups" (Baker 1975, 174). It's important to note that he's writing about comic books of the 1970s, and that studying the general mood in comics during other time periods might reveal different trends.

A year later, Rolf Wilhelm Brednich begins his folkloristic discussion of comics with the rhetorical move of comparing superheroes and comics in general to older, more venerable forms of art: "Illustrated subjects of narration were found on Egyptian tombs, on Greek vases, Roman victory columns, and so forth. Medieval legend frescoes and altar panels make the connection to the early woodcuts on broadsheets before and after 1500. From that time, a direct path leads to the picture sheets of European image-producers and to the very cradle of comics—America of the late nineteenth century" (Brednich 1976, 45). Brednich stresses the need to examine forms of communication other than oral tradition, forms that are popular and ephemeral, such as comics. He sees no fundamental difference between the popular narrative forms of the previous centuries and the comic book, by which he means that the story is conveyed by a conjunction of words and images. Those elements that have changed—number of copies, distribution, and production techniques—make comics far more influential. He confines his analysis to the content of superhero comics, finding parallels with oral tradition as understood by scholars such as Vladimir Propp and Max Luthi.

Alex Scobie takes a broader perspective in his analysis, which is relevant to the idea of the folkloresque. Whereas most of the other writers here mentioned focus on the content, Scobie attends to the books themselves and their contexts. While acknowledging that the comic book is part of literature, Scobie writes that "as a medium the comic book strives more than any other printed literature to create the intimate rapport between producer and reader which is aimed at by the oral storyteller and his listener-participants" (Scobie 1980, 73). The "pseudo—or quasi—oral nature of the comic book" is achieved, according to Scobie, through the oral editions produced on gramophone records (the equivalent at the time of this writing would be the motion comic) and comics being read aloud. He also finds relevant the migration of certain comic book characters such as Superman into other media where there is a greater oral dimension. But Scobie, following Charles Wooley (1974), also describes aspects of the creation of comic books that resemble oral tradition: anonymity in the production of comics resulting from corporate ownership (though he admits that this varies from comic to comic); a rotating series of creators, resembling the process of multiple narrators for most tales collected from oral tradition; narrative inconsistencies and formulaic expressions, which Scobie attributes to the speed at which comics must be produced; sound effects and idiosyncratic typography that create a semblance of orality on the page. Publishers also try to foster an atmosphere of reader participation through letters pages, and creators earn their living by keeping the audience paying in a way similar to professional storytellers, by teasing the conclusion or next episode at the end of the current one (Scobie 1980, 76–80).

Brednich's call to arms was not really picked up by folklorists until the twenty-first century, when scholars such as Adam Zolkover (2008) and Jeremy Stoll (2011) started paying more attention to comics. Zolkover and Stoll are both interested in the transformation of folk motifs as they become part of comic books, in the American series *Fables* and the Indian Rama stories published in *Amar Chitra Katha,* respectively. They are interested in the operation of the medium itself and the possibilities it opens up when dealing with traditional characters and narratives.

PERSPECTIVES FROM OUTSIDE FOLKLORE

According to Lauretta Bender and Reginald S. Lourie, "Comic books can probably be best understood if they are looked upon as an expression of the folklore of this age. They may be compared with the mythology, fairy tales, and puppet shows, for example, of past ages" (Bender and Lourie

1941, 546). This is perhaps the earliest academic equation of comic books and folklore, and it comes as part of a study of how children use comics. Their goal in this comparison is to demonstrate that comic books can serve the same psychological function that these prior forms of narrative have served, offering adaptive strategies for children. Yet the rhetorical move of comparing comics with other, older forms has taken hold. Scholars in the burgeoning field of comics studies make many references to folklore and folk heroes when discussing Superman. There is an interpretive strategy at work here: understand Superman, these writers seem to say, as you would understand other heroic figures from the past (see also Tim Evans's chapter 2 in this volume). There's an element of the folkloresque in analyses and interpretations that place Superman in the context of ancient heroic figures. I've already noted that in interviews the original Superman writer and creator Jerry Siegel invoked such legendary figures as Samson and Hercules; literary and comics scholars do much the same thing. They do not employ the folkloristic motif or tale-type indexes, but they are sometimes aware of the methods and literature of folkloristics.

M. Thomas Inge (1990) states that the medium closest to comics is probably cinema; nonetheless, he refers to many folk heroes and traditions when discussing comics characters. He devotes a full chapter to Superman and the early years of comic books, and in it he discusses Superman's popularity by taking into account the American interest in heroic folktales and myths, which the technology—and interest in technology—of comic books synthesized into a single genre. Inge places Superman in a line of heroes of western civilization with superhuman strength, such as Ulysses, Hercules, Samson, Beowulf, and King Arthur. The American frontier experience shaped the genesis of the country's heroes, but, Inge states,

> It is important to note that these figures achieved national prominence not because of the persistence of oral traditions but because their exploits entered the pages of books, dime novels, almanacs, newspaper columns, and sheet music (and in some cases were largely created there). A large part of the heroic folklore in this century [the twentieth] has survived because of the technology of print (and later film and television), and it might be argued that this print material is the proper folklore for an industrial society rather than the isolated oral traditions. Folklore purists would disagree with such a notion, however (141; see also Levine 1992).

Inge may have had Richard Dorson in mind when thinking of "folklore purists."[6] He cites Dorson's 1939 study of Davy Crockett and references Archer Taylor's study of the hero pattern, applying it to Superman. Inge's

application of Taylor's analysis isn't terribly felicitous (he labels Spider-Man a trickster because he is "anti-social" and makes jokes while fighting villains), but his larger point is apt: "Most of the heroes of the world of comic books likewise fit these patterns which are as old as Western Civilization. It seems obvious, then, that the comic books have continued to maintain and develop these patterns, translate them into forms more suitable to a post-industrial society, and educate young readers in a significant part of their cultural heritage" (Inge 1990, 142). "Like folklore," Inge continues, "it [the comic book] gave new life to traditions of heroic and mythic figures that the modern oral tradition cannot sustain in the face of mass communication" (145). Inge's analysis covers some of the same ground as the work of folklorists on comics referenced above.

In "Men of Darkness," C. J. Mackie (2007) compares Superman and Batman to the epic heroes Achilles and Odysseus, respectively. Though his purpose is to show that the superheroes reflect the same patterns and concerns as the epic heroes, one effect is to place the two types of heroes on common ground. Analysis of superheroes in terms of epic heroes works to validate the superhero's role in contemporary culture. Many writers note the Christian overtones in Superman stories (Brewer 2004; Galloway 1973; Garrett 2005; Koslovic 2002; Kozloff 1981; Skelton 2006). Others see echoes of ancient mythologies in Superman stories and other comic book superheroes (Knowles 2007; LoCicero 2008; Saunders 2011). One of the more influential comic book scholars, Richard Reynolds (1992), calls his study *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*.

These studies are largely literary in their understanding of heroes and mythology—folkloresque in style rather than in substance—but Terrence R. Wandtke (2012) conducts a book-length study of comic book production that is substantially folkloresque in its method. Wandtke explores the idea of the creation of comic book superheroes as analogous to oral tradition (he does not use the term folklore). Though he explores the same ideas that Wooley (1974) and Scobie (1980) address, Wandtke founds his study on the description of oral epic, following scholars such as John Miles Foley, Albert Lord, and Milman Perry. His command of these scholars' work is evident, and his account of the theory of oral composition is compelling in its application to the first several decades of comic books. He marks the difference between oral and literate culture—and thus between literate and secondary orality—as an aesthetic difference as well as a participatory one. He references fan cultures and how they have shaped the comic book industry, and he points to differences in the types of stories comic book fans prefer: "Consumers of comic book stories

demonstrate tendencies characteristic of people within an oral culture through their almost pathological desire to return to the superhero's origin; repetition is privileged and this repetition reinforces the basic truths of the story and the fan community" (Wandtke 2012, 25). Here we see the need for a further exploration of those for whom these stories are important, perhaps along the lines of the studies of participatory culture conducted by Janice Radway (1991), Henry Jenkins (1992), and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992).

Wandtke also examines reader participation in the superhero story, noting especially the sense of "collective ownership" facilitated by the actual corporate ownership of the characters: "Through the policy of corporate ownership, the industry erased the individual author (and past versions of the superhero's story) and created a sense of collective ownership that stresses currency over primacy" (Wandtke 2012, 25). This sense of collective ownership, which Wandtke develops to a greater extent than Scobie, is part of his argument that the superhero genre in comic books should be thought of in terms of oral culture rather than literate culture. There's a "different sense of authority" when creators are part of a system rather than championed as individuals: "As a curious consequence of the standard practices of superhero comic book publishers, superheroes came to be regarded as collectively owned, and the story of the superhero transcended the individual writers and illustrators currently working on the superhero titles" (43–44). Wandtke's argument for new traditionality operating in comic books comprises the most extensive statement of comics as folklore. The author shows that the form, distribution, and content operate in a manner remarkably similar to that governing oral traditional epics. His analysis fits nicely in the line of thought that digital media represent a return to something akin to oral tradition. As we have already seen, folklorists began thinking about comic books in terms of oral tradition in the 1950s.

Many books written for a popular audience interpret Superman and other superheroes as characters from a folkloric (or folkloresque) pantheon. Danny Fingeroth's (2004) *Superman on the Couch* includes a chapter titled "It Started with Gilgamesh" that draws comparisons with ancient myth, early American folklore (he calls them tall tales), and the heroes of pulps. In discussing the evolution of stories in the early twentieth century—in particular *The Shadow*, but he applies this to all superheroes from those early decades—he writes that the characters started in a "rough form" but were developed as they spanned media and time: "Like a game of cross-media telephone, the characters evolved in the manner that folk heroes always had,

but through modern communications technology, the various incarnations were transmitted simultaneously to thousands and millions of eager readers, viewers and listeners" (Fingeroth 2004, 39).

Dennis O'Neil, writer of Superman comics in the 1970s, characterizes the process of creating comics as a "folk process." "If you read Superman stories in chronological order," writes O'Neil, "you get a sense of guys around a campfire trying to top each other with tall tales; the yarns build from the extravagant to the preposterous and silly" (O'Neil 1987, 51). He compares the creation of Superman stories to a "maniacally accelerated version of the folk process; like fairy tales and myths, the Superman stories were begun by one creator but embellished and altered by many. Because of the need to *produce*, to fill those pages, meet those deadlines, get the stuff out there, what would have taken generations in the preindustrial era took only a few years. And as with folk tales, and particularly myths, the personality of the hero, as perceived by the public, was a residue left in the collective consciousness after audiences and readers were exposed to several different versions of what was presumed to be the same character" (O'Neil 1987, 51–52). Though O'Neil never uses the term folklore, it can be inferred from the phrase "folk process" and the comparison to tall tales. O'Neil's insights fit with much of what folklorists have observed: notice that he describes public perception as the result of exposure to different versions of the same tale. For O'Neil, that the means of production have changed during the industrial age has not fundamentally changed storytelling, at least not as far as comic books are concerned. Stories still come from individual creators (though he glosses over the fact that they work as a team) working toward the same ends; the process is just "accelerated." The implication is that both the ability to reach tremendous numbers of readers and the discovery of precisely what readers are willing to pay for have worked to speed the folkloric process.

In the folkloresque portrayal of Superman, the key issue seems to be technology—specifically, the different modes of storytelling made possible through developing technologies. This goes back several decades, being noticed by folklorists as early as the 1970s. Writers such as O'Neil, Inge, and Wandtke refer to industrial society and its effects as having an impact on storytelling and oral tradition. O'Neil is less specific, stating only that we can understand the creation of comic books as we understand oral tradition; Inge is more detailed, and from his comments we can infer that industrial societies have no place for oral tradition. Superman has permeated the boundaries between technologies since his inception, and no doubt will continue to do so. If we accept Wandtke's view of the trajectory of comic

book production, as new media emerge that edge closer and closer to oral tradition, so will Superman.

THE FOLKLORIC SUPERMAN

All of this discussion of comic books as a folkloresque form of popular culture overlooks one simple thing: that Superman also exists as folklore. Aspects of culture are connected, as Lawrence Levine reminds us (Levine 1992, 1372). Artists of one medium borrow from others, and that includes folkloric expression. A great deal of scholarship studies the ways that folklore has become part of popular culture, literature, and the like. Of less prominence have been the ways that popular culture has transformed or migrated into folklore. Levine points out, "What people *can* do and *do* do is to refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations" (1373). Much of fan studies has sprung from this realization, that people make stories their own even when they don't produce them. As part of the process by which people make the stories—and the character—their own, the folkloresque reverses the common trend and migrates from popular culture into the more traditionally folkloric channels of oral tradition, festival, and material culture. Superman stories travel through these channels as well. As noted above, Jerry Siegel deliberately modeled Superman on heroes of folklore. As with L. Frank Baum and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, described by Foster in the introduction to this volume, Siegel *aspired* to create a story that was similar to folklore. He succeeded, perhaps even to a greater extent than he had hoped.

Superman has become part of oral folklore in forms such as jokes and folk speech. As an instance of folk speech, the term *kryptonite* refers to a person's weakness (similar to the proverbial "Achilles' heel"). "Bizarro," the name of a villain whom Superman often encounters, has become an adjective that refers to things that are backward or opposite from what they should be. Superman has also become a nickname, applied very frequently to athletes. Superman jokes show that folkloric expressions taken from popular culture are not merely echoes of that form of popular culture; they critique and engage with it (see also the contributions of Trevor Blank in chapter 8 and Greg Kelley in chapter 9 of this volume). Here is a version of the most popular of the jokes:

> A guy walks into a bar on the top of a very tall building. He sits down, orders a huge beer, chugs it, walks over to the window, and jumps out. Five minutes later, the guy walks into the bar again, orders another huge beer,

chugs it, walks over to the window, and jumps out again. Five minutes later, he reappears and repeats the whole thing. About half an hour later, another guy at the bar stops the first guy and says, "Hey, how the heck are you doing that?!" The first guy responds, "Oh, it's really simple physics. When you chug the beer, it makes you all warm inside and since warm air rises, if you just hold your breath you become lighter than air and float down to the sidewalk." "*Wow!*" exclaims the second man, "I gotta try that!" So he orders a huge beer, chugs it, goes over to the window, jumps out, and splats on the sidewalk below. The bartender looks over to the first man and says, "Superman, you're a jerk when you're drunk."[7]

I collected this joke, extant with a great many variants, in oral tradition. Note that it's not merely a joke that happens to have Superman in it; the very qualities that make Superman so appealing to many people—specifically, his powers and morality—make the joke work. According to Ben Saunders (2011, 30), Superman stories represent a continual narrative exploration of the concept of moral virtue; this joke, and others, comprise another way to explore that concept.

Superman can be found in material culture as well, perhaps most commonly as costuming and tattoos. I interviewed and photographed many people who have made their own costumes by hand and machine, using makeup, wigs, and spandex to look like superheroes, including Superman. Scott Bayles, whom I interviewed in 2012, makes superhero costumes for himself, his wife, and his three children. Scott makes the majority of the costumes with a sewing machine, using spandex, gingham, and other fabrics he purchases online. His costumes have won contests, and he has even sold some of them. The family wears the costumes at Halloween, to comic book conventions, and to hospitals where, in character, they visit with children. Scott counts himself as a member of several groups of people organized around costuming and around Superman, such as the Superfriends of Metropolis (http://superfriends.spruz.com/); many of these fan groups organize online but meet regularly in person.

Superman has become an organizing principle for festivals as well, notably the Superman Celebration held annually in Metropolis, Illinois. During this festival, locals and fans from outside the Metropolis community perform what can best be classified as folk drama—a short narrative enacted by men and women in costume that portrays Superman's defeat of several villains—as part of an opening ceremony. There are costume contests (which often include short dramatic exhibitions of costumes), dancing, food, and other customary behaviors typical of small-town American festivals.

Superman brings people together, and whenever people get together, they are likely to engage in the sorts of behavior that we call folklore. Though the study of the relationship between folklore and other aspects of culture has a long history, standard definitions of folklore exclude comic books because they are the result of mass production and thus aren't characterized by the unmediated performance on which so much folkloristic analysis depends. There is genuine creativity involved in their production, and that creativity can resemble the dynamics of oral tradition, but the result goes through the printing press. Because of this mediation, the term *folkloresque* encapsulates the processes involved in creating Superman comics and in the discourses that surround them.

There are comparable examples of contemporary traditions of folklore and official or canonical culture. Francis Lee Utley uses the example of the Adam's apple to demonstrate that a rigidly enforced canon of biblical scripture doesn't preclude a concomitant folk tradition: "Not only is this story [about Adam getting a piece of the fruit stuck in his throat] a product of the folk, but it and others . . . are something more unusual, oral lore ultimately derived from a narrowly localized center and an identifiable written text" (Utley 1945, 1). But why does this sort of phenomenon occur? Why do people supplement a fixed text with their own, more fluid performances? The answer is complicated. For Utley, folklore derived from biblical sources exists because religious folks had to invent it "to adorn a tale when the Bible refused to tell the whole story" (5), thus anticipating participatory fan cultures (Jenkins 1992). Utley notes that much Bible folklore is etiological (i.e., the Adam's apple story); recipients need explanations for things that are left as gaps in the text or, more interestingly, to account for the peculiarities of their own world in terms of the Bible. Utley also reminds us that missionaries are the source of a large amount of folklore (Utley 1945, 14), and though he does not attribute this to the fact that much of their teaching of indigenous populations would have been oral, we can assume that it was. So we must consider many cases in which a story learned from print or other media becomes a part of a storytelling tradition (see Grider 1981). Utley even points out that biblical exegesis "gives rise" to details found in folklore: analysis produces the folkloric text. In the end Utley delineates several uses for the folkloristic exploration of the Bible. Among them is the notion that such research contributes to a well-rounded, if not more complete, understanding of humanity. The same can be said of understanding the folkloresque.

For example, in every instance of a folkloresque description of comic books cited above, we can unequivocally say that a greater depth of research

into the folkloric method would have enhanced the findings. What would Inge, who relies on Propp for an entire chapter of his work, have done with Alan Dundes's expansion of Propp's functions into allomotifs and motifemes (Dundes 1964)? And though Wandtke has a command of Ong, McLuhan, Foley, and the oral-formulaic theory of composition, there is a great potential for combining his study with other explorations of comics, oral-formulaic composition, and fieldwork-based studies on creativity by Scobie and Wooley.

Acknowledging that there are concomitant folkloric and folkloresque expressions of Superman allows us a more complete perspective on the character and his role in culture. We have seen the relationship that oral tradition has with popular culture—at once exploring the same ideas and reciprocating content. In fact, what we might argue is that the American experience has blended folklore and popular culture to the extent that to comprehensively study one requires attention to the other. Superman exists as folklore only because of the mass media, and that came into being only because of commercial interests. As Ian Gordon (2001, 182) notes, the commercialization of Superman is responsible for his status as an American icon.

However it is explicated, the folkloresque is a vital concept in the continuing study of folklore in the contemporary world. If we ignore popular conceptualizations of folklore, then we do so to our own detriment. The folkloresque offers folklorists a way to engage with scholars from other disciplines, to the benefit of all involved. By paying attention to how the folk conceptualize folklore, we come to know the folk on their own terms, which has always been one of the most commendable aspects of the folkloristic endeavor. With the case of Superman, we can see that technology is important in conceptualizing the difference between folklore and popular culture. However, we also see that the technology of storytelling is not the primary point of interest; the similarities in content are of greater value when considering Superman's place—and the place of the superhero genre as a whole—within American culture and history. Ultimately, the broad scope of American society provides for a symbiotic relationship between popular culture and folk culture, from which our conceptualizations of these forms of expression arise.

NOTES

1. Superman's intertextuality makes this study possible. There are *Superman* comics, but throughout I have foregone the use of italics so that the word Superman refers to the character as it appears intertextually. References to Superman should be taken to mean the character as he appears across various comic titles such as *Action*, *Man of Steel*, and the like.

2. Thompson's (1955–1958) *Motif-Index*, like subsequent related works published by other authors, sets out to catalogue and enumerate all the traditional, widespread elements present in a variety of folklore and literature. Its subtitle is perhaps the best explanation: *A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Thompson employs a system of letters and numbers to categorize and reference the elements he found in these sources, with various headings (D, for example, contains magic motifs, while D10–D99 include transformations from "man to different man"; adding further decimal numbers makes the motif more specific). The index provides the sources for these motifs, so that they can be checked and compared.

3. Folklorists often rely on a tale-type index similar to the motif index. Antti Aarne published the first version of this index, which was later expanded by Stith Thompson (at which point folklorists began referring to tale types by their AT number, for Aarne-Thompson). Hans-Jörg Uther expanded the index once again in 2004, and since then the tales have been referred to by their ATU number (Uther 2004).

4. Comics are often published without page numbers. The edition of *All-Star Superman* I used, which contained interviews and notes by the writer, had none. The material I have cited can be found in the notes at the end of that volume.

5. It's hard to pin down the specific motif covering Superman's change to and from his secret identity. It may fall somewhere within motifs D10–D99 and D1050, Magical garments; but more apt may be K1810, Deception by disguise—there's no magic involved in the transformation from Clark Kent to Superman.

6. Levine further examines the early twentieth-century institutional bias against studying folklore and folk music that arose out of popular culture, summing it up nicely: "Folklorists might have been purists; the folk rarely were" (Levine 1992, 1377).

7. I have included this version for brevity—those I collected during interviews were much longer. See http://www.fark.com/comments/665365/Wil-Wheaton-beer-joke-Coors-Miller -surrender (accessed March 13, 2014). As with many online jokes, this one is repeated verbatim on several other sites.

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