

The Well-Born Superhero

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The dual-identity hero—millionaire playboy by day, crime-fighting do-gooder by night—is one of the most enduring staples of American comic books, most famously embodied by Bob Kane and Bill Finger's 1939 Batman. The hybrid figure, however, originates decades earlier and encompasses a multi-generic, transatlantic array of texts unified by the central trope of controlled, individual transformation employed for social good. Early literature of the dual-identity hero spans not only comic books but plays, silent film, radio, popular novels, and pulp fiction magazines, in an expanse of genres that, in addition to superhero narratives, includes adventure, western, crime, science fiction, and romance. While these characters have no single point of origin and influence, the superhero's duality evolved within cultures that exhibited a larger preoccupation with superhuman transformation.

The contemporary superhero character type is in part a product of the British and American eugenics movements of the early twentieth century. "[R]egardless of the literary form in which it is presented," write Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880–1940*, "the Darwinian way of seeing the world and human life had taken root," and science "empowered upper-class, educated, white men to enjoy the only thing they could believe with absolute certainty: their own preeminence in a world of constant change" (47). While Bruce Wayne continues to embody that pre-eminently upper-class white man championing the status quo, the generative context of the

original, privileged, dual-identity heroes is lost in contemporary renderings of the character type.

Evolution, devoid of the protective hand of Providence, presented two assaults to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social structure: degenerates from below, and degeneration from within. The Superman was the solution to both. Although the name is associated with the comic book creation of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman was the central term of eugenics introduced by George Bernard Shaw in 1903 (with only a tangential reference to Nietzsche). The hybrid figure of the dual-identity hero emerged at this cultural moment when many eugenicists were popularizing Mendel's principles of hybridization. Beginning with Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, supermen of aristocratic birth rescue the ruling class by metaphorically blending their identities with the objects of their fear. Refiguring gothic tragedies of interbreeding into narratives of triumph, the dual-identity hero—part well-born, part criminal commoner—absorbs the threat of the unfit, while simultaneously improving the well born by purging the upper class of its degenerative parasitism. By transforming the idle rich into noble adventurers, eugenic hero narratives safeguard their class' inheritance as rightful rulers. Where selective breeding promised the eventual biological transformation of the ruling class into a ruling race of supermen, fantastical supermen of genre literatures popular before comic books delivered the eugenic future in a single bound.

As the first and most influential dual-identity Superman, Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel*

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established hybridity as a paradoxically reactionary trait for the well-born hybrids to follow in the emergent genre. As eugenics widened its cultural hold, hero hybridization expanded, particularly into pulp fiction, manifesting a range of iconic characters that include Tarzan, the Gray Seal, and Zorro. When eugenics declined in the late 1920s, the hero formula mirrored that change too. As the Superman found its ultimate expression in Nazism, a race of artificially evolved superhumans shifted from societal goal to societal threat. While still maintaining cultural fascination with the figure of the Superman, 1930s pulp fiction subverted the marriage plot to isolate superhuman heroes and thwart narratives of reproduction. In their final, comic book incarnations, supermen abandoned eugenics to defend the egalitarian principles the movement opposed. Early comic book creators were not directly responding to eugenics, but the pseudo-science provided the name and the cultural foundation for their new genre. *Action Comics* was not the Superman's first embodiments but its last.

The role of eugenics in literary history, while well analyzed in other genres, remains unexplored for some of the most popular fiction of the period. The figure of the Superman, moreover, survived and continues to thrive in only one contemporary character type, presenting the superhero as an ongoing reflection of eugenic history. An analysis of the well-born, dual-identity hero in its original context bridges the historical gap by reconstructing the genre's evolutionary foundation and revealing eugenics' enduring presence in the American hero tradition.

On the Origin of Supermen, 1883–1905

Articulating resistance to eugenics in 1928, Waldemare Kaempffert wrote in the *New York Times* that selective breeding “would establish an

artificial aristocracy, which, like all aristocracies, would seek to perpetuate itself” and therefore “[s]pecimens of humanity that fail to meet the aristocratic standards [would] become ‘weeds’” (72). The objection, while common in the 1930s, had been eugenics' primary rationale: humanity needed to be weeded.

Social philosopher Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, coined “eugenics” in 1883, the year Friedrich Nietzsche published *Also Spake Zarathustra*. The term is a translation of “well born” into Latin. After researching the alumni records of Oxford and Cambridge, Galton argued for the inherited intellectual superiority of English families such as his own and theorized that the human race could be improved through the selective breeding of their bloodlines. Nietzsche, responding to a similar evolutionary impulse, coined “Übermensch” to name one such race of intentionally evolved humans.

The Superman's eugenic and literary incarnations were conceived to battle the same threat. Analyzing “the shock Charles Darwin caused with his theory of evolution,” Andreas Reichstein concludes that “the Batman myth” and its Jekyll-Hyde duality “exemplify the fear Darwinism generated” in the last decades of the nineteenth century (346). H. G. Wells imagined humanity replaced by the “Coming Beast,” “some now humble creature” that “Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping. . . with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance, or destruction, to rise in the fullness of time and sweep *homo* away” (12).

In addition to battling other species, Victorians feared that human evolution could reverse. E. Ray Lankester in his 1880 *Degeneration: A Chapter of Darwinism* dismisses the “tacit assumption of universal progress” as “unreasoning optimism,” reminding readers that “the white races of Europe. . . are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress” (59–60). “Possibly,” Lankester warns, “we are all drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles” (60). In addition to “criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics,” argues Max Simon Nordau in 1895, “degeneration

could manifest even within the most well-born. By broadening his definition to encompass any “contempt for traditional values of custom and morality,” Nordau includes the example of “a king who sells his sovereign rights for a big cheque” (6). Bloodlines could be insulated, but the well born themselves might be the source of the crisis. “Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained,” writes Lankester, “seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration” (33). He likens the phenomenon to how “an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune” or how “Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world” (33). The problem is wealth and the “habit of parasitism” it produces: “Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, and eyes; the active highly gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs” (33). Degeneration therefore threatened the well born on two fronts: infection from below and decay from within. Eugenics’ Superman defended against both.

Advocates such as Shaw applauded the botanically engineered “changes from the crab apple to the pippin” and called for an application to human reproduction (182). Gregor Mendel’s seminal study in plant hybridization, while independent of Darwinism, supplied eugenicists a scientific foundation. Originally published in 1865, six years after *On the Origin of Species*, Mendel’s “Experiments on Plant Hybridization” was first translated into English in 1901. Though eugenicists did not all agree on the application of Mendel’s ideas, his essay became one of the international movement’s most influential texts. Applying his “transformation experiments” to the study of metabolic disease the following year, British physician Archibald Garrod revealed the possibility that a range of human traits could be hereditary and therefore manipulated; like Mendel, eugenicists sought “*the transformation of one species into another by artificial*” means (39, 36). Projects expanded simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, disseminating Mendel’s ideas to the broader cultures. In 1903, the American

Breeders’ Association formed to promote wide-scale selective breeding and eliminate such degenerate traits as feeble-mindedness, promiscuity, criminality, insanity, and poverty. In 1904, Galton founded the School of Eugenics at University College in London, and the Carnegie Institute funded the creation of the Station for Experimental Evolution and the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island.

George Bernard Shaw and Baroness Emma Orczy wrote at this critical moment when the varied field of eugenics was transitioning from theory to application. *Man and Superman* was published in 1903, the year *The Scarlet Pimpernel* premiered at Nottingham’s Theatre Royal. Two years later, *Man and Superman* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London as the newly published novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel* reached bookstands. Tamsen Wolff in *Mendel’s Theatre* identifies Shaw as “an ardent eugenicist” who “had attended Galton’s series of lectures” and “was in direct contact with” Karl Pearson, “the leading disciple of Galton,” “during the months he was writing *Man and Superman*” (41–2). “Shaw,” writes Keum-Hee Jang, “accepted Galton’s eugenic religion as a supplement to conventional religion,” arguing that “Shaw’s view of social change cannot be explained in isolation from his thought on evolution and eugenic debate in the Victorian context” (232).¹ While his ideas are distinct from Galton’s and Pearson’s and his belief in a life force is opposed to Darwin’s natural selection, Shaw brought eugenic theories of heredity into the literary mainstream.

Less biographical information is available on Orczy, but she did experience personally the fears eugenics embodied, that the well born would lose their birthright to expanding lower classes. The Baroness was an aristocrat in the Austrian–Hungarian Empire who lost her family estate and inheritance in a peasant revolt. Her family was forced to flee, eventually living in England where she began her writing career with a hero who assumes an alias to rescue fellow aristocrats from French revolutionaries. Her first novel is one of the most influential texts for the later superhero genre, and she is often cited as the originator of

the dual-identity hero. Gary Hoppenstand traces Orczy's influence to "Johnston McCulley's Zorro to D.C. Comics' Superman and Batman" (xviii). Danny Fingeroth agrees: in "the realm of heroic and superheroic disguises, we should probably begin with Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* mythology" (48). Although it is impossible to prove a direct causal influence between Mendelian eugenics and her dual-identity adventure tale, Orczy imagined similar solutions to similar fears at the same cultural moment.

Where Orczy looks backwards to a historical revolution to express contemporary social anxiety, Shaw applies the rhetoric of revolution directly to Edwardian England. John Tanner, the protagonist of *Man and Superman*, pens "The Revolutionist's Handbook and Pocket Companion," which Shaw included in the play's publication. Although well-born, Tanner voices only mild sympathy for France's guillotine victims, "those unlucky ladies and gentlemen, useless and mischievous as many of them were," and likens them to America's own useless millionaire class (205). His agenda is a eugenic revolution. Both *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and "The Revolutionist's Handbook" figure hybridization as the tool for improving and so ultimately protecting the aristocracy by the controlled crossbreeding of nobility with common stock. The two works' and Mendelian eugenics' shared aim is not interbred equality through the merging of classes but an extension of pre-existing social divides by producing a hardier species of noble.

Orczy and Shaw's Tanner, like so many eugenicists, conflate biology and culture and so indiscriminately apply Mendel's principles to the production of any trait. "If two plants which differ constantly in one or several characters be crossed," Mendel explains, "each pair of differentiating characters. . . unite in the hybrid to form a new character" (4). "Thus," declares Shaw's John Tanner, "the son of a robust, cheerful, euphetic British country squire, with the tastes and ranges of his class, and of a clever, imaginative, intellectual, highly civilized Jewess, might be very superior to both his parents" (187). Orczy selects the same differentiating characteristics for her fic-

tional mates. Her Sir Percy is robust: "Tall, above average, even for an Englishmen, broad-shouldered and massively built" (42); and cheerful with a "perpetual inane laugh" and "good-humoured" air (46, 82). His "plebeian" wife, Marguerite, is considered "the cleverest woman in Europe" (34). Tanner acknowledges that such reproductive pairings in which "two complementary persons may supply one another's deficiencies" do not make "congenial marriages" and therefore "good results may be obtained from parents who would be extremely unsuitable companions" (186–87). Orczy demonstrates the same assertion with Percy and Marguerite's estranged marriage: "she took no pains to disguise that good-natured contempt which she evidently felt for him" and he in turn "has the most complete contempt for his wife" (45, 55).

Despite marital incompatibility, Tanner argues that such combinations—"a countess to a navy or of a duke to a charwoman" (186)—will eventually produce a hybrid class of Supermen. Tanner cannot, however, define the new species except as some "sort of goodlooking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for a mate," which he declares "a great advance on the popular demand for a perfect gentleman and a perfect lady" (182). The ruling class, replaced by democracy, serves no societal function. Tanner identifies himself as a "Member of the Idle Rich Class," and its flaw is at best "Uselessness," at worst parasitism, Lankester's term for the cause of biological degeneration reapplied to social order (177, 241). While he conceives of the Superman as superior in multiple characteristics, Tanner's primary breeding goal is the elimination of his class' central flaw. "No elaboration of physical or moral accomplishment," he insists, "can atone for the sin of parasitism" (237).

Orczy's Sir Percy is an embodiment of the parasitically useless gentleman. A "descendant of a long line of English gentlemen," Percy "has more money than any half-dozen men put together, he is hand and glove with royalty" (56, 80). He has also inherited more than wealth: "all the Blakeneys for generations had been notoriously dull, and. . . his mother had died an imbecile" (45). She

was, in fact, “hopelessly insane,” suffering a “terrible malady which in those days was looked upon as hopelessly incurable and nothing short of a curse of God upon the entire family” (44). This noble but tainted bloodline resulted in a “hopelessly stupid” son, a “nonentity” with no “spiritual attainments” and “the air of a lazy, bored aristocrat indifferent to matters of honor and justice” (45, 82, 45). He is the degenerated well born prophesized by Lankester two decades earlier.

Despite aristocratic uselessness, however, both *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Man and Superman* present democracy as a failed solution, expressing a greater fear of lower class degenerates destroying civilization. Handing “the country over to riff-raff,” asserts Tanner, “is national suicide, since riff-raff can neither govern nor will let anyone else govern except the highest bidder of bread and circuses.” Orczy declares a crowd of French revolutionists “savage creatures,” “human only in name” (1). Her villain, who “despised all social inequalities,” is “blindly enthusiastic for the revolutionary cause” (93). Tanner acknowledges England’s similarly egalitarian ideals, but concludes that nostalgia for the former order remains: “every Englishman loves and desires a pedigree” (223). Tanner answers that desire by reasserting the lost social structure in a new guise: “The overthrow of the aristocrat has created the necessity for the Superman” (223). Orczy depicts the same overthrow—the guillotine claims “all that France had boasted. . . of ancient names, and pure blood,” “descendants of the great men who. . . had made the glory of France” (1)—in order to establish the necessity of her well-born, aristocracy-saving hero.

Where Shaw’s Tanner describes the eventual “weeding out of the human race” (186), Orczy extends the plant metaphor to her contemporaneously transformed hero. Through dual identity, Orczy achieves the goal Tanner and other eugenicists project onto a distant future. Rather than spending generations to produce a biological superman through hereditary means, her narrative transforms its well-born instantaneously. Wedding Marguerite to the degenerated Percy, Orczy produces a figurative offspring, the Scarlet Pim-

pernel, a hybrid who is both “the best and bravest man in all the world” and yet also a “humble English wayside flower” (31). Percy the “inane fop” (60)—a kind of hot house plant—is crossed with hardy weeds, resulting in a new species uniquely capable of “the noble task he has set himself to do” (31). As a master-of-disguise, the Scarlet Pimpernel is a metaphorical cross between Percy and commoners so poisonous enemies fear approaching them. To a French border guard, he assumes the appearance of a “horrible hag” carrying “the small-pox” (7). Where Tanner theorizes crossing a noble with a Jewess, Percy merges identities with “an elderly Jew”; Chauvelin, “who had all the Frenchman’s prejudice against the despised race, motioned to the fellow to keep at a respectful distance” before “turning away with disgust from the loathsome specimen of humanity” (213, 214).

Orczy’s noble-common hybridization, however, does not produce a species that dilutes or equalizes its inherited qualities. Mendel proposes that “hybrids, as a rule, are not exactly intermediate between the parental species” (7), but something new. Similarly, Orczy’s hybridized character traits are literally super-human and manifest only after the resolution of the mystery plot collapses Percy and the Pimpernel into a single character. When speaking about his estranged marriage, Percy’s formerly “slow, affected” voice “shook with an intensity of passion, which he was making superhuman efforts to keep in check” (198, 35). As the Pimpernel, he has “superhuman cunning” and “almost superhuman strength of will,” and “the man’s muscles seemed made of steel, and his energy was almost supernatural” (199, 206, 264).

Orczy’s adventure fantasy achieves through non-biological means Tanner’s call for the biologically bred Superman. As the Pimpernel, Percy has absorbed his wife’s differentiating characteristics—cleverness, imagination, intellect—while remaining robust and cheerful. Orczy has also metaphorically bred out her hero’s lesser traits. Mendel explains that “those characters which are transmitted entire. . . in the hybridization. . . are termed the *dominant*, and those which become latent in the process *recessive*” because they

“disappear in the hybrids” (7). *The Scarlet Pimpernel* treats aristocratic uselessness as a recessive trait. Thus, any “imbecile” qualities that Percy inherited from his “half-crazy mother” disappear in the hybrid Pimpernel, purging him of his “foppish manners” (45, 127, 46). In the process, the character subverts “the curse of God” and assumes a godly role himself, what Tanner demands of all eugenicists: “Man must take in hand all the work that he used to shirk with an idle prayer” (181).

Both *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and “The Revolutionist’s Handbook” figure such god-like, evolutionary work as actions designed to benefit a larger society. Orczy frames the estranged marriage as an admonitory tale—“Thus human beings judge of one another, with but little reason, and no charity” (128)—so the reconciliation may become a model against destructive prejudices. Tanner frames his handbook as the solution to a national threat, and his socialist disdain of property suggests an egalitarian agenda. Both works, however, reinforce class divides. Despite his cross-class breeding treatise, Tanner ends *Man and Superman* by marrying a fellow member of his Idle Rich. While the Scarlet Pimpernel is praised by the working class staff of The Fisherman’s Rest, he saves only fellow aristocrats, yet he does so “for the sake of humanity” (68), echoing a central conceit of eugenics.

Both works, in fact, further expand social divides. Tanner’s example of selective breeding pairs a squire father and a Jewish mother and so the offspring would take its father’s name. The commoner mother provides traits for the aristocracy, while her class receives nothing. Not only does the plebian Marguerite marry gentility with no benefit to her former proletariat class, her own character ultimately suffers as a result of the eugenic pairing. Though the primary agent in the first half of the novel, she “could do nothing but follow” in the second half (233). Orczy applies the phrase “the cleverest woman in Europe” to her eight times before the revelation of her husband’s secret, but only once afterward in order to contrast her transformation: “the elegant and fashionable Lady Blakeney, who had dazzled

London society with her beauty, her wit and her extravagances, presented a very pathetic picture of tired-out, suffering womanhood” (249). She is a husk of her former character, passive and comparatively dimwitted. Her intelligence—once her differentiating characteristic—is transferred entirely to her husband. Orczy’s adventure plot first establishes an ideal eugenic pairing and then skips a literal portrayal of the multigenerational breeding process to dramatize eugenics’ ultimate goal: the strengthening and eventual transformation of the upper class through the weakening and eventual elimination of the lower classes.

Orczy also applies the transformation beyond the microcosm of the Blackeney marriage. The Pimpernel’s “Secret Orchard” includes other “good-looking, well-born and well-bred Englishmen” (52, 28). Tanner questions the usefulness of the “Idle Rich Class,” and Orczy answers: “The idle, rich man wanted some aim in life—he and the few young bucks he enrolled” (156). A member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel insists that their motives are stereotypically shallow, declaring England “a nation of sportsmen, and just now it is the fashion to pull the hare from the teeth of the hound. . . Tally-ho!—and away we go!” (32). Sport in the service of fashion echoes the “inaneities” of the foppish Sir Percy (128), but Marguerite recognizes a superior motive in their mission: “the sheer love of the fellow-men” (67). *The Scarlet Pimpernel* transforms shallow sportsmen into noble adventurers, and as the first dual-identity Superman, Orczy’s hero establishes the prototype for the league of well-born hybrids to follow in the emergent genre.

Experiments in Hero Hybridization, 1893–1928

“Hybridity,” writes Annie E. Coombes and Avtar Brah in *Hybridity and its Discontents*, “has become a key concept in cultural criticism, post-colonial studies, in debates about cultural contestation and appropriation, and in relation to the

concept of the border and the ideal of the cosmopolitan.” The term as applied to human beings echoes nineteenth-century scientific racism and “signals the threat of ‘contamination’ to those who espouse an essentialist notion of pure and authentic origins,” which also “lends the term a potentially transgressive power” (1). As a postcolonial concept, hybridity resists imperialism by promoting the agency and creative adaptability of the colonized. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, the rhetoric of hybridity reinforced colonial hierarchies. People of mixed race were seen as evidence that the combining of lower and higher subjects produces subhuman offspring. Where late Victorian gothic tales reflect this colonial assumption, early twentieth-century genre authors refigure hybridity as superhumanly powerful. Postcolonial narratives would later employ that power against imperial oppressors, but adventure writers hybridized their heroes in the service of the ruling class.

The rise of Mendelian eugenics in the first decade of the twentieth century parallels the birth of multiple hybrid heroes in popular culture. Owen Wister formulated the western vigilante in *The Virginian*, published in 1902. In addition to assuming the godlike role of moral arbiter, the frontiersman, like the superhuman Percy-Pimpernel, combines himself with the forces he combats. Richard Slotkin defines the western genre as a narrative of hybridization that requires borders to be crossed by a hero

whose character is so mixed that he... can operate effectively on both sides of the line. Through this transgression of the borders, through combat with the dark elements on the other side, the heroes reveal the meaning of the frontier line (that is, the distinctions of value it symbolizes) even as they break it down. In the process they evoke the elements in themselves (or in their society) that correspond to the “dark”; and by destroying the dark elements and colonizing the border, they purge darkness from themselves and the world. (351–52)

The western formula both fears and romanticizes border-crossing, expressing the same colonial anxiety that fueled eugenics.

The pseudo-scientific defense against inferior bloodlines rose as Europe’s and the US’s colonial expansions ended and opportunities for immigra-

tion increased. Frederick Jackson Turner, who considered American history “the history of the colonization of the Great West” (1), declared the frontier closed in 1893. In 1896, former Bureau of the Census Director Frances Amasa Walker cited “the complete exhaustion of the free public lands of the United States” in his warnings against the immigration of “foul and loathsome” eastern Europeans: “They have none of the inherited instincts and tendencies which made it comparatively easy to deal with the immigration of the olden time. They are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence.” Fear of the previously distant Other moved to the metropole, transforming the Other into the degenerate. Where scientific racism justified imperialism abroad by constructing a hierarchy of races, eugenics expanded the hierarchy to ethnicity and class at home.

To defeat the animal-like degenerate, the hybrid hero must combine himself with it. Reichstein observes the frontiersman’s border-transgressing qualities in the later dual-identity hero Batman, who blurs “the line between man and beast... He is Bat-Man, a mixture of man and beast, of good and evil” (346). Richard Reynolds applies hybridization to the overall superhero character type who “is both the exotic and the agent of order which brings the exotic to book” (83). The duality originates in nineteenth-century British novels, which, Robert Young argues, “are concerned with meeting and incorporating the culture of the other” and so “often fantasize crossing into it, though rarely so completely as when Dr Jekyll transforms himself into Mr Hyde” (3). Reichstein identifies the use of “an animal as a means of showing the dual side of man’s nature” as “a prominent motif in the ‘decadent Gothic’ novels” of the late Victorian period, including H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (346). Though a later advocate, Wells began his career skeptical of eugenics, and Moreau’s half-men are laboratory-produced degenerates, organisms that fall below their human ancestors in the biological hierarchy. Jekyll and Hyde are a similarly failed hybrid

unable to blend into a single, Jekyll-dominated entity. Hyde—a violent, lustful, physically stunted, animal-like, urban-dwelling criminal—is Victorian literature’s ultimate degenerate. The Mendelian models of heroism that emerge after the turn of the century correct these tragic fantasies into anxiety-assuaging triumphs by enlisting Well’s Coming Beast in the service of the ruling class. To stifle Hyde’s threat, adventure narratives bond degenerate criminality to an aristocratic master.

The gentleman-thief, another dual-identity character type influential to the later comic book superhero, also emerges at this moment of eugenics’ rise and further reflects its anxieties. Like the frontiersman, however, the gentleman-thief falls short of the Superman’s generative hybridity. E. W. Hornung introduced the figure in 1898 with A. J. Raffles, a cricket playing society man by day and amateur cracksman by night. He premiered on American stages as the Scarlet Pimpernel was first performed in England. Jacob Smith analyzes how Raffles opposes the more threatening figure of the “working-class criminal type,” quoting 1903 reviewers who described Raffles as an “artist” and “epicure” in contrast to a “mere thief” or “low-browed malefactor.” “The rhetoric of artistry, with crimes committed as an amateur aesthetic diversion,” explains Smith, “defused the fact that the protagonist was a criminal” (39). Moreover, Raffles is not idly rich and so avoids Lankester’s biological “habit of parasitism.” By helping himself, Raffles helps society against both the degenerate from below and degeneration from above.

Imitators replaced Raffles’ anti-hero purity with Robin Hood do-goodery, but still tempered their gentleman-thieves with aristocratic self-interest. R. Austin Freeman and John Jones Pitcairn’s 1902 Romney Pringle robs only from criminals; O. Henry’s 1903 Jimmy Valentine employs safe-cracking skills to rescue a child from a bank vault; and Arnold Bennett’s 1904 Cecil Thorold commits crimes to punish worse criminals. Thorold, already wealthy, is not motivated by money or philanthropy; he desires entertainment. He is, as Bennett’s subtitle asserts,

A Millionaire in Search of Joy, and he begins his self-motivated quest the year millionaire Andrew Carnegie began funding eugenics research with the goal of creating real-life Supermen.

Despite the successful grafting of criminality onto a dominant aristocrat, gentleman-thief hybridization falls short of the Superman. Aesthetic diversions maintain but do not raise the well born. In Shaw’s analysis, the character type remains literally in hell because “Hell, in short, is a place where you have nothing to do but amuse yourself” (97), whereas the heaven of *Man and Superman* is for those striving to progress. The gentleman-thief escapes his ennui, but the hybrid Superman of the Scarlet Pimpernel—a species of gentleman-thief stealing nobility from democratic degenerates—devotes his League to a new sport and then transforms that sport into a noble enterprise, saving himself by saving others. The frontiersman safeguards the perimeter, the gentleman-thief prevents internal degeneration, but only the Superman has evolved into something new.

As early twentieth-century adventure literature produced these postgothic experiments in heroism, eugenics continued its own expansion. In 1906, millionaire John Harvey Kellogg founded the Race Betterment Foundation to sponsor conferences at its Michigan sanitarium. With the support of future President Woodrow Wilson, Indiana passed the first eugenics sterilization law the following year. In 1911, the American Breeder’s Association published its first “Preliminary Report,” advocating prevention of unfit breeding through immigration restrictions, racial segregation, anti-interracial marriage laws, sterilization, and so-called euthanasia through the use of gas chambers. The First International Eugenics Congress discussed similar legislation at the University of London the following year; future Prime Minister Winston Churchill later served as the Congress’s vice-president.

The year 1912 also marks the movement of the Superman into pulp fiction, evidence of eugenics’ expanding cultural base. Edgar Rice Burroughs—following the success of his first pulp hero, John Carter, a “gentleman of the highest type” (v)—introduced his second serial novel, *Tarzan of the*

Apes, two months after the Eugenics Congress convened. Sharon DeGraw observes in Burroughs many “biases associated with the eugenics movement in the United States” (11), and biographer John Taliaferro describes him as “obsessed with his own genealogy” and “extremely proud of his nearly pure Anglo-Saxon lineage,” while endorsing the eugenic “extermination of all ‘moral imbeciles’ and their relatives” (19). Burroughs, like Orczy, employs adventure literature to portray an accelerated version of that process.

While eugenicists could only promote the laborious, multigenerational system of selective breeding in the hopes of biologically transforming the well born into Supermen in some far-off future, Burroughs’ literary path to the Superman ennobles noble blood within a single specimen. Tarzan—“White-Skin” in ape language (39)—is a variation on Orczy’s triumphant, rather than Stevenson’s failed, dual-identity model; he is both “the aristocratic scion of an old English house” and “King of the Apes” (228). His duality accomplishes the same transformative purpose as Percy’s; because he has been raised to “physical perfection” in the laboratory of the jungle, he is “unmarred by dissipation, or brutal or degrading passions,” and is free of the habits of parasitism displayed by his London cousin who dips “his finger-ends into a silver bowl of scented water” (80, 79). The degenerating attributes of the aristocracy are purged, allowing his full genetic potential to flourish.

The result is a new breed who “not only surpasses the average white man in strength and agility but far transcends our trained athletes and ‘strong men’ as they surpass a day old babe” (228). A French captain declares him a literal “superman,” Shaw’s term now in wide use (226). The hybrid “Monsieur Tarzan,” a French-speaking “polished gentleman,” manipulates dinnerware “exquisitely” before going “naked into the jungle, armed only with a jack knife, to kill” a lion (247, 248). When the smitten Jane Porter declares Tarzan a “gentleman,” Burroughs redefines the term in the way that Galton translates “well born” into “eugenics.” Although Jane had frowned on “American girls who married titled foreigners,”

the transformed Greystoke is an improved species of gentleman, one who, like Sir Percy, has earned the right to be paired with a eugenically appropriate commoner, the intelligent daughter of an American professor (165). That union occurs after the gothic fear of Moreau’s degenerate animal-men, that Tarzan is “a cross between an ape and a man,” is erased and his aristocratic lineage proven (254).

Burroughs also inadvertently showcases the flawed understanding of genetics that defined eugenics. In the chapter “Heredity,” the young Lord Greystoke is not only “endowed by inheritance with more than ordinary reasoning power” but he knows how to bow in a courtly manner, “the hall-mark of his aristocratic birth, the natural outcropping of many generations of fine breeding, an hereditary instinct of graciousness which a lifetime of uncouth and savage training and environment could not eradicate” (58, 191). Like so many eugenicists, Burroughs cannot differentiate between hereditary and environmental influences. Though less scientific than scientific breeding, his use of Tarzan’s environment as a method of biological transformation is equally absurd. The jungle is a fantastically transformative narrative element, possible only within genre fiction, which condenses the long-term breeding process to achieve instantly the biological goal eugenics advocates could otherwise only forecast.

Months after *Tarzan of the Apes* completed its serial run in *All-Story* magazine, the US government, motivated by the fear of miscegenation that Burroughs and the earlier gothic authors express, segregated black and white employees. Kellogg’s Race Betterment Foundation hosted its First National Conference the following year. By 1914, Galton’s eugenics curricula spread to forty-four universities, including Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and Brown. George William Hunter’s high school biology textbook, *A Civic Biology Presented in Problems*, describes families of degenerates as social parasites, concluding that if “such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading” (263). Eugenic theories had become conventional knowledge.

The teens also mark an expansion point for Superman hybridization in popular literature. Frank L. Packard's *The Adventures of Jimmie Dale* applies Orczy's model to the contemporary urban setting of the gentleman-thief. In his first 1914 story, Packard introduces a commoner strain to American nobility, the aristocratic St. James Club, "an acknowledged leader" of "New York's fashionable and ultra-exclusive clubs"; while membership "guaranteed a man to be innately a gentleman... there were many members who were not wealthy... men of every walk of life" (4). The "cosmopolitan" club echoes the surface egalitarianism of Marguerite's "exclusive" Paris salon, but Harvard graduate Jimmie Dale, with "the grace and ease of power in his poise," received his membership by bloodline via his wealthy father (9). The "innate gentlemen" that is "the 'hall mark' of the St. James" remains a traditional well born, now fortified by commoner strains of "authors" and "artists" (4).

As the "Prince of Crooks," Jimmie also bonds nobility to criminality as the masked Gray Seal, suppressing criminality by dominating its field: "he was the king-pin of them all" (23). He adventures in a "business section of rather inferior class, catering to the poor, foreign element" and, as another master-of-disguise, combines himself with the degenerate Larry the Bat, an opium-addicted "denizen of the underworld" (28). Jimmie also assumes a version of Percy's foppish disguise by speaking "languidly" and claiming motives of "Pure selfishness" (20, 35). The idle rich continue to appear useless, but the initiated reader knows their secretly noble attributes. Like Raffles, "the art of the thing was in his blood" which, like the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, he pursues to satisfy his "adventurous spirit" (6, 11).

In the process of nullifying both elements of degeneration, Packard's hybridization transforms another well born into the Superman. Though the hero's "crookedness" begins with Raffles-eque self-amusement, it gains "a leading string to guide it into channels worthy of his genius" (11). Just as Marguerite refigures the League's sport into humanitarianism, a female blackmailer forces Jim-

mie to aid others, thereby mixing "pure deviltry" with altruism and raising the Gray Seal to a "Philanthropic Crook" (5, 21). Moreover, Jimmie gains an awareness of his own superiority through adventuring: "there came a mighty sense of kingship upon him, as though all the world were at his feet, and virility, and great glad strength above all other men's" (294). The blackmailer selects worthy working-class characters for his aid, but ultimately the Gray Seal benefits himself and another member of his own class, the blackmailer, a French aristocrat deprived of her inheritance. Like Jimmie, she leads a life of crime-fighting disguise, but once he restores her name and fortune, both abandon their mission. Their working-class identities, having served to ennoble another example of Shaw's "perfect gentleman and a perfect lady," are discarded (182). Packard's first novella ends in their romantic union, providing a transformed "goodlooking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for a mate" and so optimum conditions for future offspring (182).

While Packard was publishing his short stories, eugenics deepened its cultural hold. The Second National Conference on Race Betterment met in 1915, and Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* reached the best-seller list the following year. Grant's call for the sterilization of defectives, weaklings, and ultimately worthless race types was praised by former President Theodore Roosevelt, and Adolf Hitler would later refer to the book as his Bible. Also in 1916, Stanford University psychologist Lewis M. Terman introduced I.Q. testing to identify and segregate defectives from the gene pool. Margaret Sanger published the first issue of *Birth Control Review* in 1917, the year Packard collected his first dozen Gray Seal stories; Sanger declared Superman the aim of birth control through the prevention of reproduction by the unfit.

Germany's Socialist German Workers' Party formed in 1920, the year the well-born, dual-identity hero reached a new cultural height with Douglas Fairbanks' *The Mark of Zorro*, evidence of eugenics' influence on both sides of the Atlantic. The film adapted Johnston McCulley's *The Curse of Capistrano* serialized in *All-Story Weekly*

a year earlier. The film's opening subtitles liken Zorro to "a Cromwell," one of Shaw's examples of a spontaneous Superman. McCulley also reproduces Orczy's hero formula: Don Diego, "a fair youth of excellent blood" but also a "dandy" with a "languid grasp," combines identities with a "common fellow," a "highwayman," and so redefines himself and "*caballero*" as the animal-man "Senor Zorro," literally Mister Fox (7, 194, 37, 4, 18, 3).

Although Zorro is a self-proclaimed "friend of the oppressed," McCulley likens the lowly Indians his hero saves to "rats," and Don Diego addresses them as "scum!" (247, 136). His plot centers instead on securing a wife of "the best blood" to produce an "offspring to inherit and preserve [his father's] illustrious name" or face disinheritance (16, 161, 53, 176). Like the Scarlet Pimpernel, Tarzan, and the Gray Seal, Zorro is the means for Don Diego to transform from a parasitic aristocrat into a Superman worthy of reproduction. His dual identity is not simply a strategy of disguise; his costume triggers a fantastical biological change:

The moment I donned the cloak and mask, the Don Diego part of me fell away. My body straightened, new blood seemed to course through my veins, my voice grew strong and firm, fire came to me! and the moment I removed the cloak and mask I was the languid Don Diego again. (264)

The mask is another variant on Dr. Moreau's vivisection and Dr. Jekyll's serum, but one that allows the aristocrat to maintain his class superiority. The novel concludes with his "endeavor to establish a golden mean," replacing degenerate criminality and degenerative uselessness with hybrid virility; in order to suit his future wife, the new Don Diego "shall drop the old languid ways and change gradually into the man you would have me" (265). Once again, an adventure author collapses the extensive process of selective breeding into a single character, allowing a well born to become a superman by fathering himself.

Like the Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro also transforms his fellow well borns into true nobles. "Be men, not drunken fashion plates!" he orders; "Live up to your noble names and your blue

bloods" and "make some use of your lives!" (167, 168). After enlisting "the young men of all the noble families" into a "new league" with "adventure a plenty," Zorro "fears it was a lark with them," but the caballeros learn "their strength and power" and overthrow the corrupt government (257, 129, 168, 252, 258). "Thus," writes Nadia Lie, "McCulley's Zorro revives the old idea of nobility," ideals that have suffered from Lankester's degeneration (491). Reflecting Galton's definition of eugenics, Zorro improves the pre-existing "inborn qualities of a race" and develops "them to the utmost advantage." Despite his stated oppression-fighting mission, Zorro is a revolutionary only in Shaw's sense, a well born fighting for well borns. He is a noble bandit, a hero type who, Eric Hobsbawm explains, "seeks to establish or to re-establish justice or 'the old ways,' that is to say, fair dealing in a society of oppression. . . He does not seek to establish a society of freedom and equality" (55). Having strengthened his class, Don Diego unmask and marries, fulfilling his obligation to maintain his now fully noble bloodline.

In the decade that Fairbanks presented Zorro and the figure of the well-born Superman to an international audience, eugenics also reached its high mark. The Second International Congress, featuring Alexander Graham Bell and future President Herbert Hoover, met in New York in 1921. President Coolidge signed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act into law, drastically reducing immigration of non-Anglo Saxons. Coolidge argued: "America must be kept American. Biological laws show. . . that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races" (qtd in Kevles 97). In 1924, Virginia joined twenty-eight states in barring marriage between whites and non-whites and broke new legislative ground with the Virginia Sterilization Act. Hitler published *Mein Kampf* the following year, reiterating gothic fears of degeneration through the mixing of low and high blood. The US Supreme Court agreed in 1927, ruling eight to one in favor of Virginia's sterilization law; Oliver Wendell Holmes declared the majority opinion: "It is better for all the world [that]. . . society can prevent those who are

manifestly unfit from continuing their kind” (qtd in White 406). The Rockefeller Foundation funded the construction of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Genetics, and Eugenics in Berlin the same year. Eugenics curricula had spread to 376 universities.

The final growth of eugenics parallels the expansion of the well-born, dual-identity hero in popular culture. Over a dozen variations appear during the second and third decades of the twentieth century, including Johnston McCulley’s *Thunderbolt* (1920), the *Man in Purple* (1921), and the *Crimson Clown* (1926); Herman Landon’s *Gray Phantom* (1917) and the *Picaron* (1921); Russell Thorndike’s *Doctor Syn* (1915); Charles W. Tyler’s *Blue Jean Billy Race* (1918); Edgar Wallace’s *Four Square Jane* (1919); Eustace H. Ball’s *Scarlet Fox* (1923); Erle Stanley Gardner’s *Phantom Crook* (1925); Graham Montague Jeffries’ *Blackshirt* (1925); Paul Ellsworth Triem’s *John Doe* (1928); and Leslie Charteris’ *The Saint* (1928) (Nevins). The character type expanded into film with Edward José and George B. Seitz’ *The Iron Claw* (1916), Grace Cunard and Francis Ford’s *The Purple Mask* (1916), and Louis Feuillade’s *Judex* (1917); and into light opera with Sigmund Romberg, Oscar Hammerstein II and Otto Harbach’s *The Desert Song* (1926). The Superman’s popular culture incarnations reached fruition as the eugenic movements that inspired and defined them achieved social and political dominance.

Acts of Sterilization, 1929–1939

“After Mendel discovered his famous principles of heredity,” writes Waldemare Kaempffert in 1932, “we seemed to be in a fair way of achieving the superman”; however, when “the hereditary characteristics called genes were discovered much of this cocksureness was shaken.” Beginning with Frederick Griffith’s 1928 breakthrough experiments, the study of heredity shifted away

from eugenics. The Rockefeller Foundation withdrew funding in favor of better scientifically grounded projects that would develop into the field of molecular biology. Kaempffert lauds Lancelot Hogben’s 1932 *Genetic Principles in Medicine and Social Science* and its rejection of selective breeding on scientific grounds: “The eugenicists, who usually know nothing of genetics, would do well to peruse Dr. Hogben’s book.”

The Nazi Party, however, claimed a majority in Germany’s government in 1932, and the Third International Congress of Eugenics recommended the sterilization of fourteen million Americans with low IQ scores. The following year Hitler’s cabinet enacted the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases in Future Generations, requiring physicians to report to Heredity Health Courts individuals meeting standards for sterilization. In 1935, South Carolina became the thirty-first and last state to pass a sterilization law. Though well entrenched, American eugenics was in decline; a Carnegie Institute review panel concluded that the Eugenics Record Office lacked scientific merit and recommended halting all eugenics funding.

The allure of the Superman, however, remained. As selective breeding grew unpopular, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported a range of alternate means for attaining a goal no longer limited to the well born. Rather than “pick out a few superior children and make supermen of them alone,” explained Rockefeller Institute researcher Dr. Alexis Carrel, “we would improve all of mankind” (“Everybody Has Telepathic Power”). New, egalitarian possibilities included hormones (1929), glandular stimulation (1931), chemistry (1934), vaccines (1934), nutrition (1935), diet (1936), and the transplantation of ape glands into children (1936), literalizing Moreau’s gothic animal-men. In contrast to “the Hitler program of race purification,” Carrel refigured mixed breeding as a new ideal: “It may be that crossing civilizations as we do in America produces the best minds.”

Popular culture incarnations of the Superman mirrored the shift in social attitude. Where Orczy,

Burroughs, Packard, and McCulley end their heroes' narratives with marriage plot closure, beginning in the late 1920s, authors deny that closure and the subsequent reproduction it implies. New superhuman protagonists face death, isolation, and celibacy, all forms of narrative sterilization to subvert the threat of a singular Superman expanding into a race. Reversing the evolutionary anxiety that created eugenics and its heroes, the Superman became Well's Coming Beat, the species that could battle against humanity for survival.

When Jack Williamson and Miles J. Breuer apply Burroughs' Tarzan pseudo-environmental hybridization model to science fiction in their 1929 "The Girl from Mars," they imagine the offspring of a superior race of aliens raised by the comparative savages of the US After Mars "was destroyed by atomic energy released by intelligent entities," embryonic capsules sent "to perpetuate their race on another world" land in New Jersey, and the widower narrator incubates his adoptive daughter, Pandorina (7, 10). Like Lord Greystoke, the well-born Pandorina is set apart by her "white skin" and "astonishing aptitude that must have been her inheritance from a higher civilization" (6, 11). The authors provide her with a eugenically appropriate mate—her "tall and slender, blond, and cleanly made" adoptive brother (12)—but when the wedding approaches, Williamson and Breuer prevent consummation with the arrival of a "haughty and aggressive" Martian male who woos Pandorina himself (15). Though also raised by humans, "the striking and powerful figure with his mighty, muscular limbs" is set "apart from ordinary men" by a "strange, malign spirit," and he recognizes Pandorina by her "pallor of skin, color of hair, and luster of eye," all physical racial attributes unaffected by upbringing (15). The mating rivalry intensifies with a second Martian suitor who has mastered "the science of warfare," further evidence of the well borns' social threat (20). When Pandorina's human fiancé wins her back, he is met with "fiendish, inhuman rage" from the "ultrahumundane man" who murders him (21). These supermen, rather than aiding humanity through noble adventure or genetic mingling, seek only to perpetuate their own

destructive species. When the two males war for Pandorina, her adoptive father lures them onto an artillery range where all three are destroyed. Although Pandorina's death is conveniently accidental—"I had quite forgotten her. God knows that I meant her no harm! But then it was too late" (25)—the God-evoking father eliminates not only the threat of alien purebloods displacing humanity, but also the possibility of future hybrids. No Superman, whether a Martian "ultramundane man" or a crossed offspring, survives.

Like Williamson and Breuer, Philip Wylie offers a version of failed superhuman reproduction in his 1930 *Gladiator*. Wylie reveals both the shift away from selective breeding and the continued interest in the figure of the Superman through means unrelated to social class. A "professor of biology" who "lectured vaguely" on "the law discovered by Mendel" believes instead that "chemistry controls human destiny" and "vaccinate[s]" his pregnant wife to "produce a super-child," what he imagines will be "the first of a new and glorious race" (3, 5, 18, 26). Instead, his son, Hugo, becomes a lone Superman, alienated from society and unable to aid it or himself. He is not well born in either a eugenic or class sense, and where a dual identity-hero ennobles through humanitarian adventure, Hugo exhausts a list of heroic pursuits, all of which fail.

Hugo's single friend, Shayne, is a reiteration of Shaw's idle gentleman; he has "too much money," considers his family "useless," and is "bored with the routine of his existence" and "weary of the world to which he had been privileged" (170, 171, 168, 173). His degeneration is infectious, making the ecstasy that Hugo felt after enlisting show "signs of decline" after a night of debauchery (173). Where dual-identity heroism would save such a well born, Shayne enters the war with Hugo and quickly dies in combat. Hugo attempts to ennoble him posthumously by "invent[ing] brave stories for his friend" and "tripl[ing] his accomplishments" (207). Like Zorro's father, Shayne's parents, who had "disinherited" him, "feel that at last" their son had come "into the Shayne blood and heritage," fulfilling his well-born potential (206). That fulfillment, however, is

a lie, and Wylie further taints the family with unrepentant war profiteering, reversing the primary doctrine of eugenics by rejecting upper class superiority.

Wylie also thwarts his Superman's search for a eugenic mate. Hugo develops relationships with a half dozen women, but, like his heroic pursuits, each pairing fails. Where the figure of the Superman previously attracted mates, he now repels them. At the sight of his strength, Hugo's last lover "screamed and drew back," shouting "Don't touch me!" (276). Percy, Tarzan, Don Diego, and Dale secure wives by displaying their superhuman qualities, but Hugo loses his because he "isn't human" (276). Since Hugo suspects he is "sterile," Wylie further prevents hybrid offspring, leaving Hugo to consider reproduction by other means (62). A scientist suggests that he use his father's serum and create "a thousand of you," the "new Titans!" (327). To decide who should be selected for transformation, Wylie evokes for the first time Galton's theories: "Eugenic offspring. . . the children of the best parents" (327). As a result, God in the form of "a bolt of lightning" from a cloud "like a huge hand" destroys Hugo and the formula, reasserting the role of Providence that mankind usurped in the quest for the Superman (331, 330). Like the trustees of the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, popular authors had rejected eugenics.

The well-born, dual-identity hero, however, does not fade with the failed pseudo-science that inspired it. Beginning with *The Shadow Magazine* in 1931, the character type expands further into pulp literature. Writers continue to reject eugenics by undermining marriage plots and eliminating the prospect of reproduction. Where Orczy introduces dual identity as a device for romantic closure, Walter Gibson disrupts the trope by eliminating half of his hero's character. When "Tall, well-bred" Lamont Cranston appears for several issues to be the man behind the Shadow's cloak, Gibson reveals that the millionaire is only another of a potentially endless array of disguises, allowing no Marguerite to solve the mystery and unify both character and marriage (Tinsley 73). Similarly, Lester Dent's 1933 Doc Savage assumes

no secondary identity. Although a well-born "superman" like Tarzan, Savage receives no financial inheritance upon his father's death and refuses to perpetuate the family bloodline: "There won't be any women in Doc's life" (35, 67). Norvell Page, while not dooming his well-born hero to celibacy, locks the Spider and his fiancé in perpetual courtship: "It was part of the compact between them, the oath they had sworn when [he] had lost his fight against their love and told her the truth of his harried existence, and the fact that they could never marry while work remained for the *Spider!*" (39). Even Lars Anderson's overtly sexualized Domino Lady receives no romantic closure: "Devoting her life to a campaign of reprisal against the ruthless killers of her father, the amorous little adventurous had denied herself the love she craved with all her heart" (76). Despite its original mate-transforming function, the dual-identity mission now explicitly excludes marriage. To be a post-eugenic Superman is to be isolated and therefore unproductive.

Jerry Siegel corresponded with Jack Williamson, reviewed Orczy's and Wylie's novels in his high school newspaper, read Tarzan comic strips in his daily newspaper, and watched the film adaptation of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Jones 35, 65, 78, 116). There is no evidence that the twenty-year-old Siegel was aware of and directly responding to the history of eugenics, but when he conceived the most famous popular culture Superman, his new hybrid hero reflected those influences. Like his predecessors who found fantastical means to condense selective breeding into an instantaneous product, Siegel brings Superman to Earth not from an alien planet but from Earth's literal eugenic future. In Siegel's earliest 1934 scripts, Superman is "a child whose physical structure was millions of years advanced from" humans because he was a child of Earth "in its last days"; as "Giant cataclysms were shaking the reeling planet, destroying mankind," "the last man on earth" "placed his infant babe within a small time-machine. . . launching it" to "the primitive year, 1935, A. D." (qtd in Trexler). Siegel later changed planets but retained eugenics through "Krypton, a distant planet so far advanced in evolution that it

bears a civilization of Supermen—beings which represent the human race at its ultimate peak of human perfection” (13). In both, Siegel irrevocably divides his well-born hero from his genetically superior roots, and, because no superhuman mates survive, there is no threat of a Superman race overwhelming humanity. Siegel also prevents hybrid offspring by reversing Orczy’s dual-identity trope. His Lois Lane is no Marguerite-like sleuth, and the hero’s opposing identities thwart rather than aid romantic closure. Clark hopelessly pursues Lois who “can barely bear looking at him, after having been in the arms of a REAL HE MAN” like Superman, but the aloof Superman puts her off: “But when will I see you again!” she asks; “Who knows? Perhaps tomorrow—perhaps never!” (68, 27). The love triangle grew so ingrained that when Siegel tried to break it in 1940, his DC editors rejected his script (Jones 183). The Superman must remain solitary.

One of the comic book Superman’s first imitations, Bob Kane and Bill Finger’s Batman—introduced the year Germany invaded Poland—is ironically atavistic. The dual-identity hero is a literary throwback, a pulp degenerate regressing to an earlier formula: a well-born millionaire bonds himself with an animal to battle criminal degenerates preying on his fellow millionaires. Finger and Kane also reproduce the performance of idleness that had once signified the now forgotten threat of degeneration: “young socialite” Bruce Wayne “must lead a boring life” and “seems disinterested in everything” (4, 9).

Together Superman and Batman defined the comic book genre, extending the tropes of eugenics decades past the movement’s end. Similarly, eugenics historian Edwin Black notes that “Although the [Eugenics Record Office] stopped functioning in 1939, America’s eugenic laws did not” (398). Black calculates that in the 1940s and 1950s 25,000 Americans were sterilized, with the federal government continuing the practice in Puerto Rico and Native American reservations through the sixties and seventies (400). Anti-miscegenation laws were enforced until the 1976 Supreme Court ruling struck them down; the last state, Alabama, did not repeal its statute till 2000. Although the president of the American Eugenics

Society acknowledged in 1946 that “eugenics had a racial and social class bias. . . not based on any scientific foundation” (qtd in Black 418), bioethicist Allen Buchanan questions whether contemporary genetic enhancements reproduce the same goal: “Will the Rich Get Biologically Richer?” (102). The allure of the Superman continues into twenty-first century science, shadowed by its equally resilient incarnation in popular entertainment. Shaw’s goodlooking philosopher-athlete—whether in blue tights or genetically engineered DNA—lives on.

Note

1. Tamsen Wolff and Keum-Hee Jang are two of the only scholars who analyze Shaw in a eugenic context. The 1987 collection of *Man and Superman* essays edited by Harold Bloom, includes no reference to eugenics; Bloom declares Shaw no “Darwinian,” concluding that he “doubtless intended [the title] to mean: the Superman of Nietzsche” (2, 5), although the play dismisses “that German Polish madman” and his “Superman” as merely “the latest fashion among the Life Force fanatics” (136); “The cry for the Superman,” declares Tanner, “did not begin with Nietzsche, nor will it end with his vogue” (182). Carl H. Mills in “Shaw’s Superman: A Re-examination” disagrees with Bloom, asserting that “the supermen of Shaw and Nietzsche are not nearly as similar as critics have made them,” but instead of Galton or Mendel, Mills looks to Carlyle, Ibsen, Wagner, and Schopenhauer for influences (135). *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw* (1998) indexes no references to eugenics and its leading authors, with only one aside to Darwin (Berst 59), and Bloom’s 2011 edition of Shaw essays repeats the omissions. Keum-Hee Jang, however, analyzes Shaw’s Fabian socialism in relation to eugenics, noting that the Fabian Society was “very enthusiastic about Galton’s views” and, like Shaw, actively promoted them (231).

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