

FROM EVERYMAN TO HERO: THE INCULTURATION AND PROPAGANDA
OF THE *ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL* AND *SPY SMASHER* SERIALS

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ABSTRACT

Though the serial film is academically and critically disregarded, the format was a valuable tool of inculturation and propaganda. Serial films were widely attended by American middle class adults and children during their sound era heyday, a period where messages regarding World War II were conveyed to audiences. During the years of 1941 and 1942 the superhero genre of serial film informed viewers that the Everyman could and should become a hero to defend their country. Two Republic Pictures releases, *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941) and *Spy Smasher* (1942), adapted comic book source material in order to impart the latter message. The intensity of each serial's message varied based on their releases in pre- or post-WWII Involvement societies.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “From Everyman to Hero: The Inculturation and Propaganda of the *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* Serials,” presented by Jayson William Quearry, candidate for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

CAPTAIN MARVEL VS. SPY SMASHER

The Brain-O-Graph started everything. From March 21st to June 13th of 1941, *Whiz Comics* featured a conflict between two of the comic book's titanic, superhero stars: Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher. *Whiz Comics #15* sees Spy Smasher, whose secret identity is that of Alan Armstrong, fall under the spell of his arch rival, the German mastermind known as The Mask. A device dubbed as the Brain-O-Graph is what allows The Mask to control his opponent. As The Mask explains:

This little device is capable of twisting a man's mind completely around. . .
.and I intend to put it to very good use on you, Mr. Alan Spy Smasher
Armstrong! I'm going to make you my first lieutenant. I'm twisting your
brain so you'll work against the government! I want you to kill all the
generals! Kill! Kill! Kill! (*Whiz Comics* No. 15 33)

Working almost to expectation, the device brainwashes Spy Smasher completely, but backfires in that The Mask's directive to "Kill!" is turned upon him. Swiftly, Spy Smasher begins targeting military installations; with his patriotic spirit reversed, "Spy Smasher. . . .has, himself, become a Smasher Spy!!!!!" (*Whiz Comics* No. 15 29). A friend, now a nemesis, of Spy Smasher, Admiral Corby, asks at the end of *Whiz Comics #15*, "Who can stop Spy Smasher?" (36). Captain Marvel, Fawcett Publications' signature character and the lead in a recently released film serial, became the obvious answer. Across the pages of *Whiz Comics #16*, *17*, and *18*, the mythically empowered Captain chased the confused ex-patriot, stopping his attempts to assassinate Admiral Corby and his daughter (and love interest of Alan Armstrong), Eve, as well as averting other acts of sabotage. Amidst Spy Smasher's anti-American rampage for "Der War Lord" (a veiled allusion to Adolf Hitler), he utilizes a hypno-ray to indoctrinate three laborers in a similar fashion to his own brainwashing (*Whiz Comics* No.17 32). The comic was clearly worried about the negative powers of persuasion.

Whiz Comics #18 turns that power back on Spy Smasher, with Captain Marvel breaking him out of his controlled stupor. Once Spy Smasher's punches are proven useless against the might of Captain Marvel ("Those blows are like feathers"), a word box describes how "Capt. [sic] Marvel summons all his will power [sic] to combat the accursed spell that weighs down Spy Smasher" (*Whiz Comics* No. 18 9). The following panel depicts Marvel staring intensely out of the page, locking eyes with the reader. The accompanying word balloon commands, "You are waking up. . . .Returning to your true self! Forgetting your evil ways! Fighting back to what you were!" (*Whiz Comics* No. 18 9). Opposite of the hypno-ray, Marvel's persuasive stare and words affect a positive change, shaking Spy Smasher loose from his haze! In the final panels of the issue, Spy Smasher goes to thank Captain Marvel, but is rebuffed, "Skip it! I did it for my country as much as for you. Uncle Sam needs men of your caliber in the fight to preserve democracy" (*Whiz Comics* No. 18 36). While these issues are on one level a trivial marketing gimmick to draw in youthful readers eager to see their favorite superheroes duke it out, the content of the story also emphasizes the symbolic value these characters provided for American society. During and following the release of *Whiz Comics #15* through *#18* both Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher would appear in weekly, serialized films. Again marketed primarily towards children, these two film serials utilized these iconic superheroes as symbolic representations of cultural directives and nationalistic wartime sentiment. The *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941) acted as the former, while *Spy Smasher* (1942) championed the latter. Like the Brain-O-Graph, Spy Smasher's hypno-ray, and Captain Marvel's persuasive stare, the subtext of these serials worked to sway the cultural conscious of the audience.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

"There are still people who - at the mere mention of serials. . .will snort and respond haughtily, "Why, that stuff wasn't worth anything. It was just trash!" (*Serials-ly* 6). The latter quote from William C. Cline's collection of essays over the serial format, *Serials-ly Speaking*, broadly represents the general disregard for serial films within the academic community. Normatively, the film serial is considered to provide adventurous thrills, childish escapism, and archetypal battles between good and evil, but little else. Even scholars who regularly write about the format, including Ben Singer, Alan G. Barbour, Roy Kinnard, and William C. Cline, himself, focus their research on the history, production aspects, and study of the formalistic and generic qualities of the serial. As valuable as research of the sort may be, the absence of study regarding the cultural impact of the serial leaves room for examination. Kinnard, in his book *Fifty Years of Serial Thrills*, and Richard M. Hurst, in *Republic Studios: Between Poverty Row and the Majors*, come closest with conversations about the symbolism of specific serials, but restrict their examinations to one or two page studies. A long form contemplation about the social values espoused within serial films will, then, help to facilitate an understanding of the cultural impact these often disregarded films provided.

The cycle of serial popularity was a long one, full of diverse generic content that was targeted toward a range of audiences. An attempt to examine each period, genre, studio, and historical context of every serial would only result in a vague surveying of the format's cultural worth. So, as not to over complicate my discussion, I will restrict my focus to two serials released from a singular studio during culturally distinct periods. Republic Pictures,

given the studio's regard within the industry and academic community as a premiere producer of B grade cinema, becomes the source of my study. As reported in the October 19th, 1942 edition of *Variety*, "The year of upheaval and radical change that was 1942 found Republic Studios firm and sure, solid in financial and sales soundness," a monetary success that indicates connectivity between content and consumer during the period (27). Considering the studio's consumer popularity during 1941 and 1942, as well as the culturally important shift between a pre- and post-WWII involvement America during these years, I have chosen films released within each period. *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* are ideal for study, as the films were released nearly a year apart and within differing social climates. As well, both serials convey a similar message, but with varying levels of overtness and political intent. Marketed at middle class and adolescent audiences during pre- and post-war periods of American history, *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* convey to audiences that the Everyman, the average American male, must transform into the hero when the country requires assistance!

CHAPTER 3

GENESIS OF THE SERIAL

Serial films began appearing during the silent era of cinema and developed into a recognizable format from 1912 onward. Following the creation of motion picture technology, an early venue for the exhibition of film was the nickelodeon. Nickelodeons gained their name, partially, from the inexpensive nickel fee spectators had to pay to view the films. This presentation format catered to lower class citizens, often matching unsophisticated material with the minimal ticket price. As Ben Singer explains in his entry on silent serials within *The Oxford History of World Cinema*:

Serials were a hangover from the nickelodeon era. . . Rather than catering to 'the mass' - a homogenous, 'classless' audience fancied by the emerging Hollywood institution - serials were made for 'the masses' - the uncultivated, predominantly working- and lower-middle-class and immigrant audience the had supported the incredible 'nickelodeon boom'. (105)

As Singer emphasizes, the serial was created, in part, to fill the niche of the nickelodeon and, as such, serials were viewed, rightly or not, by the public, studios, and critics as subpar material, providing minimal artistic stimulus. Furthering the view that serials were a populace format was their initial connection with intermedia promotions, gaining a reputation as a gimmick more than high art. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer writes that "J. Stuart Blackton, Vitagraph's cofounder and president, was. . .the first to implement the fiction tie-in idea" (270). Published in fan magazines like Blackton's *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* and others, such as *Movie Pictorial*, *Motion Picture Classic*, *Photoplay*, and *Moving Picture Stories*, these stories featured prose pieces broken up with stills from the shorts or features being promoted (*Melodrama* 270-273). July 1912 saw the release of *What Happened to Mary?*, considered the first film serial. As Roy Kinnard explains near the beginning of his cantankerous, but passionate detailing of *Fifty Years of Serial Thrills*:

[*What Happened to Mary?*] was a joint effort between the Thomas Edison studios and a now-forgotten publication called McClure's Ladies' World. The concept was basic, but valid; a continuing fiction story was first published in McClure's, and as each installment appeared a corresponding chapter of the Edison serial would be released to theaters, cannily exploiting what was, in effect, an early incarnation of the movie "tie-in." (7)

Being linked, as Kinnard describes, with prose stories in publications like *McClure's Ladies World*, serial films appropriated a similar, trashy stigmatization as those magazines and the photoplay fan material released previously.

Two other serials, *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1914) and *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), would follow shortly after *What Happened to Mary?*, continuing to develop the form and define the characteristics of the silent serial. A slew of other female-lead serial films were released by nearly every major production studio throughout the 1910s, making the decade "the era of the serial queen," as Singer puts it (*Oxford* 109). Distinct from the muscular male heroes of the sound era serial, the silent film serial's female protagonists "defied the ideology of female passivity and domesticity, and instead displayed traditionally 'masculine' attributes, competences, and interests" (*Oxford* 109). These films were low budget, second tier releases for studios, designed to generate a profit buffer to support feature length productions. As such, serials were paired with features at the theater, creating repeat business and increasing feature attendance by luring audiences each week with another section of a total story.

In his introduction to *The Republic Chapterplays*, R. M. Hayes explains that the episodic nature of the serial, meaning individual parts of a larger, narrative whole, lead to studios like Pathé, Columbia, and others dubbing them as chapterplays (2). Outside of being called chapterplays and serials, the format was also lovingly referred to as the cliffhanger. Simply, the nickname developed out of a narrative tradition where protagonists were left in a

precarious situation (occasionally hanging off the side of a cliff) by the end of a chapter, causing audiences to return the following week to see if or how the heroine or hero survived (Hayes 2-3). Another less accurate, but oft used descriptor for the format was series. As Rudmer Canjels' *Distributing Silent Film Serials* stresses "In America in the early 1910s, the terms series and serial were used not very specifically," as both described installment narratives, taking until "after 1915. . .[for] most cliffhanger productions. . .[to be] called a serial" (xviii). The silent era serial was, thus, definable as dissimilar from film series by the characteristic of an episodic narrative where chapters had individual conflicts, but continued a longer narrative arc across weekly releases.

Largely consistent since 1912, the content, promotion, and, above all, reception of the format began to alter during the late teens and twenties. Rental office polls between 1914 and 1917, analyzed by Singer in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, tell a tale of fluctuating interest with the serial film (110). The poll data shows fickle "yes" and "no" responses to the question of whether serials are an audience favorite, which, for Singer "reflected the growing rift. . .between a residual 'nickelodeon' cinema. . .and an emergent Hollywood model of mass entertainment. It is also likely that many audiences simply tired of the serial's highly formulaic stories, dubiously thrilling thrills, and low production values" (110). While the serial format was viewed disparagingly, it was, as R.M. Hayes notes, at least "almost always considered an adult entertainment" (2). The onset of sound during the late twenties greatly altered how the serial would be viewed. With larger budget, feature films becoming an accepted art form, the margin between these and the serial format widened. In *The Republic Chapterplays*, Hayes describes how "the serial soon became a weekend add-on attraction in second run and smaller cinemas," which "made them more

interesting to children, and by the mid-thirties they found their comfortable home in most movie house programs as matinee and "kiddie show" attractions" (3). With serials having to appeal to a new audience, an audience which was marginal at the time, the content and marketing of the format altered drastically. Few studios even maintained a serial production arm, but those who did realized that the content needed to become fantastical, visually energetic, and overflowing with testosterone.

CHAPTER 4

SOUND COMES TO THE SERIALS

"The sound serial was the comic book of the screen," as Roy Kinnard states, a format that relied on repetitious plotting, bold iconography, and physical feats of wonder (8). With nearly all of the major studios abandoning the format, Universal, Columbia, and Republic Pictures dominated the sound era. Having found that serial attendance was diminishing, these studios altered the business model that was previously in place, which also led to the characteristics of the serial film being augmented. Effectively, the way these films communicated to audiences, the sorts of cultural messages they conveyed, changed.

William C. Cline's *In the Nick of Time: Motion Picture Sound Serials* delineates the formulaic equation of the sound serial, describing "The basic ingredients of a good serial," as being "a Hero, Heroine, a Villain, his Henchmen, a Prize, and the Perils" (*In the Nick* 4). The hero and heroine roles were, for the most part, reversed from the silent era, where the serial queen reigned supreme. During the sound era, musclebound men of action anchored the film, coming to the rescue of what would have been the Paulines, Katherines, and Marys of previous decades. With the altered presentation of the serial, now marketed almost exclusively to adolescent boys, these male heroes were the studios' attempt at realigning to a new audience. Largely, it worked. Of course, the overriding goal was still to earn repeat business, so, outside of the traditional cliffhanger endings and chaptered storytelling, sound serials also incorporated characteristics of the mystery genre. Cline writes that one strategy was "to make the Hero or the Villain - or both - a mystery figure whose identity was revealed only in the final episode," commonly teasing viewers each week with a line-up of possible

candidates¹ (*In the Nick* 4). On the surface, the mystery may seem to be a gimmick, but the symbolism of who was behind the mask was often more important than the protracted process of uncovering the culprit. As Cline explains the villain was "Symbolically. . .the protagonist of evil. . . .He was the threat and society the threatened" (*In the Nick* 6). What sort of evil the villain was a symbol for was always in flux, but because the serials spoke in broad brushstrokes the message was clearly conveyed, a message of values counter to those favored by American culture. As there was "No attempt. . .ever made to lend justification to any of his acts. . . .[the villain was] to be wholeheartedly resisted and completely defeated," not only by the hero of the film, but the audience, too, once they had exited the theater's liminal darkness (*In the Nick* 5).

Equal to the symbolism of the serial villain was that of the hero. A byproduct to his study of Republic Studios' history, Richard M. Hurst summates the dynamic of the forces of good and evil within the sound serial:

The basic value system of the serial is represented in a plot formula which is a simplistic representation of good versus evil in black and white terms with evil temporarily winning each round but with good ultimately triumphing. The major audience, comprised of children, the uneducated, and those desiring a temporary escape into a more simple approach to life, accepted and understood this basic rule. The concept of good ultimately triumphant over evil resulted in a firm moral and ethical basis for all sound serial production, the foundation of which was a naive idealism. (79)

When it came time for these chiseled heroes of cultural virtue Hurst references to jump into action, they would often don a mask, cape, and costume, transforming into a superheroic avenger. An historian and cataloger of sound serials, Alan G. Barbour, contextualizes the rise of the superhero in the serial format, pointing out that an increased readership of comic

¹ Republic's *The Lone Ranger* (1938) and *The Masked Marvel* (1943) are ideal examples of the mysterious hero trope, with the audience kept in rapt suspense over which of an ensemble of characters will be revealed from underneath the masks of their respective heroes.

strips and books, during the latter years of the Great Depression, lead to "shrewd serial producers quickly. . .[realizing] the commercial advantage in transferring these new idols to the screen" (63). The built-in fanbase for these comic book superheroes were eager to see their favorite two dimensional illustrations come to life on the screen. While the specifics of these characters were often altered when transferred to film², one characteristic, as William C. Cline points out, remained the same: "To earn. . .trust from an audience right away, the actor had to be believable. This was particularly true of one playing a superhero from the comics" (*In the Nick* 69). Cline is unclear as to why superhero characters, more than heroes in other genres, had to be naturalistic. I suggest that believability was required to sell the symbolic message these characters represented; if viewers do not buy into the ideologies of these characters or their methods of enacting them, the hope of applying what the superhero represents in the real world is lost. Legendary stuntmen, like Yakima Canut, David Sharpe, Dale Van Sickel, and Carey Loftin, deserve credit for aiding in the believability of the hero. The physicality of the superhero had to be swift, agile, impactful, and seemingly beyond average human capability, all of which was made possible by the work of these performers. Regularly replacing the lead actors during the ample fight scenes and action sequences of serial films, these stunt performers are largely responsible for providing a mythical figure for young viewers to idolize.

Where Hurst and Cline feel sufficient in lumping all costumed hero serials under one heading, I wish to separate those films adapted from radio programs, newspaper strips, and pulp magazines, serials like *The Spider's Web* (1938), *The Green Hornet* (1940), and *Captain*

² *Captain America* (1944) is the definitive instance of these non-fidelitous alterations, losing his secret identity of Steve Rogers, his circular shield, his sidekick Bucky, and his archrival, The Red Skull.

Midnight (1942), respectively, from those adapted from comic books. I make the distinction, in part, because of a larger discussion about what differentiates a comic strip from a comic book. Too many scholars use the two terms interchangeably. Comic books were derived from comic strips, originally created by binding together reprints of various newspaper strips, but the bound, booklet format distinguished them. This was a product advertised and intended for children, different from the "funny pages" that brightened up other, often adult, publications, but also one whose lengthier page count allowed for denser storytelling and plotting. Each medium brings with it specific adaptive hardships, so by distinguishing the comic book serial adaptation from the radio or comic strip adaptation, I am writing, specifically, about how the comic book medium is transferred to the serial format.

CHAPTER 5

REPUBLIC PICTURES - THE SUPERHERO STUDIO

While Columbia would conclude the sound serial era with major comic book adaptations, like *Batman* (1943), *Superman* (1948)³, *Batman and Robin* (1949), and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950)⁴, serial film scholars, like Cline, contend that "Republic is usually thought of as the comic hero company," namely because of how "*The Adventures of Captain Marvel* . . . pioneered a completely new type of screen champion - the SuperHero [sic]" (*In the Nick* 20). The studio is also said to have promoted a specific style of superhero serial, *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* among them, featuring similar stylistic and thematic tendencies.

Republic Pictures began as an entity in 1935, when the heads of various independent film studios merged together under the shared banner. At the center of the merger was Herbert J. Yates. Yates was "a tobacco executive and owner of Consolidated Film Industries (a lab which processed footage and produced optical effects for movies)," prior to becoming the longstanding president of the company (Kinnard 59). Joining with Yates were Ned Levine, representing Mascot Pictures, as well as W. Ray Johnston and Trem Carr of Monogram Pictures (Hurst 1-2). Founding Republic Pictures was nearly the only shared business decision the four took part in, as "Nat Levine. . . left within eighteen months of the

³ During the late thirties, Republic Pictures submitted a bid to National Comics (later DC Comics) to adapt Joe Siegel and Jerry Shuster's iconic creation. However, National's request that Republic only be allowed to release the film once, with the rights reverting back to National for further releases, killed the deal (Kinnard 107). Tom Tyler, who went on to star in *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*, was even auditioned for the role of Superman.

⁴ The latter three films were produced by Sam Katzman, who had a reputation for licensing popular properties only to release cheaply financed adaptations in search of ample profit. The Columbia-Katzman films are, for this reason, viewed as campy, spoofs of the genre.

merger to go to Metro Goldwyn Mayer. . . [while] Carr nor Johnston had any lasting effect on either the Republic philosophy or production techniques and emphases" (Hurst 17).

Which left Hebert J. Yates as the primary creative and financial voice to guide the studio, a position he held until July 1st, 1959 (Hurst 27).

In *Kings of the Bs*, Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy explain that Yates had constructed a four tier production system, structured by budget, with productions "classified as Jubilee, Anniversary, Deluxe, or Premiere grade" (25). While these categorical distinctions do indicate that Republic was not a one trick company, the studio developed a reputation as the leading producer of quality chapterplays. Though Yates steered the studio to success in nearly every other aspect, Hurst contends that "it is Levine who established the serial format which helped make Republic the important action studio that it was" (17). Fights and riveting adventure were at the core of the Republic serial, with the studio barely leaving any breathing room between set pieces. The emphasis on spectacle is, in Roy Kinnard's words, derived from how "Republic Pictures. . . seemed to maintain a rigid, inflexible notion of the type of paying customer who formed the target audience for cliffhangers; in the studio's corporate mind those customers were apparently male, unsophisticated, and juvenile" (71). Essentially, Republic directed their films and the political, cultural, and patriotic messages symbolized within them toward the normative Everyman. A feminine perspective was regularly absent, but a gender bias of the sort further reflected the studio's intended recipient of the inculturating ideals present in the comic book serials released during the sound era. Not only were Republic's serials marketed toward male youth, but also specific portions of the country that were more likely to be receptive to the concepts being presented. Once again, Hurst elaborates that "Since Republic's chief market

was in the Midwest, the South, and the Southwest, this resulted in the local censors being a bit more demanding and thus made Republic's "message" more conservative and traditional" (4). Though in interviews Yates would attempt to portray his studio as providing simple escapist fare, Hurst clarifies that the studio had a "commitment to one service serial per year and. . .[produced] various patriotic and preparedness films" consistently (15). Outside of comic book hero genre entries, like *Spy Smasher*, Republic also released *The Fighting Devil Dogs* (1938), *G-Men vs. the Black Dragon* (1942), and *The Masked Marvel* (1943), among others, each featuring resilient American heroes combatting villainous saboteurs who often plotted to impede the war effort by attacking military factories on the homefront. A consistent production crew was responsible for practically every Republic serial release, which lead to a consistent style, pacing, and thematic message. John English, Spencer Gordon Bennet, and William Witney were the staff directors, while the Lydecker brothers provided effects, and stuntmen, like David Sharpe, Joseph Yrigoyen, and Tom Steele, aided the studio's regularity. Republic undoubtedly had a mission statement, one that shaped and influenced the audience that frequented the studio's releases, and, as Hurst concisely sums it up, the "policy was a consistent reinforcement of the American way of life and the values of heroism" (42).

CHAPTER 6

ORIGIN STORIES - CAPTAIN MARVEL AND SPY SMASHER

During the late 1930s, the comic book industry had discovered the lifeblood that would sustain it for decades to come: the superhero. Superman had been rocketed to Earth by the typewriter keys and pencils of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in June 1938 and, in the proceeding years, was swiftly followed by other notable costumed, super powered heroes. Among those heroes were Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher. Considering the prominence of DC and Marvel Comics in the contemporary zeitgeist, the progenitors of these companies, National and Timely Comics, are commonly the focus of study regarding early comic book history. However, Fawcett Publications⁵ ranked equally among these two industry leaders during the Golden Age of comics. Fawcett's signature publication was *Whiz Comics*, an anthology series that featured short, serialized installments or adventures of various characters. On the introductory page of the February 1940 *Whiz Comics* #2, a bold proclamation announces the "All new! All different!" arrival of no less than seven original costumed heroes. At the top of the list was Captain Marvel, the superhero that would come to be most closely associated with Fawcett. Spy Smasher also first appeared in the issue, both he and Marvel being written and illustrated by the duo of Bill Parker and C.C. Beck. Elements established by Parker and Beck in these first stories for both Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher shaped the characters' significations once they were adapted to the movie screen.

Captain Marvel's first adventure established the character as a modern mythic figure, derived from the symbolism of classical myths, while Spy Smasher was distinctly grounded

⁵ Fawcett and its properties have since been appropriated by DC Comics after a lengthy court battle over copyright infringement regarding Captain Marvel and Superman.

in a naturalistic conflict, acting as a preparedness icon. The featured story in *Whiz Comics* #2 is Captain Marvel's, leaping out at the reader with vibrant colors and imagery. A young newspaper salesboy and eventual radio reporter, Billy Batson is introduced as the viewer's point of view character. Batson appears to be around eight or ten years old, a choice by Parker that appeals to and relates with the adolescent readers Golden Age comics targeted. Shortly after the character's introduction, an ancient wizard named Shazam grants upon Batson mystical powers that allow him to transform into Captain Marvel. Shazam informs Captain Marvel that, "All my life I have fought injustice and cruelty, but I am old now - my time is almost up. You shall be my successor" (*Whiz Comics* No. 2 6). A tripartite reminiscent of the one described in the sphinx riddle of the Oedipus myth is reformatted for the story, with Batson representing youth, Marvel middle-age, and Shazam old age. By associating his characters with the Oedipus myth, Parker, by appropriation, is representing the Captain Marvel origin story as modern mythology. With Batson magically maturing into Marvel, who is intended as a replacement for Shazam, Parker is subtextually communicating to young readers that it is their cultural responsibility to continue the work of their elders. Captain Marvel's purpose is also described as being a defender against the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, which are represented with statuesque emblems as pride, envy, greed, hatred, selfishness, laziness, and indifference (*Whiz Comics* No. 2 3). Not only are these emotions reminiscent of the seven deadly sins of the Christian faith, making for another mythical comparison, but also contrasted with the six abilities Captain Marvel is endowed with. Shazam's name (which when shouted by Batson transforms him into Marvel) is revealed to be an anagram for Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury, with each representing an ability, including wisdom, strength, stamina, power, courage, and speed,

respectively. Culled from various mythological narratives, these names and superpowers establish a cultural equation for the ideal citizen, two thirds of which are comprised of physical qualities. Additionally, the origin story pits that idealized citizen against an equal set of negative qualities, not intended to be modeled by the reader. Republic altered this formula only minorly when adapting the comic into a serial, repurposing the message for another audience.

The Spy Smasher origin story appearing in *Whiz Comics #2* alternatively establishes the character amidst pro-war tensions. Releasing two years prior to American involvement in World War II, the Spy Smasher story openly displays acts of sabotage against American Naval vehicles during the opening page montage. These attacks are revealed to be orchestrated by "The Mask, master mind [sic] of America's most dangerous spy ring," whom Parker carefully does not label as German within this first story (*Whiz Comics* No. 2 34). Just as The Mask's identity and affiliation are kept ambiguous, so too is the alias of Spy Smasher. The origin story for the character, like many serial films of the time, plays coy with who among the cast will be revealed as Spy Smasher, even enticing the reader to return next month to find out. For this reason, Spy Smasher's face is never fully displayed within the issue, as C.C. Beck illustrates him as a striking silhouette or from behind. In each pose, Beck makes sure to emphasize Spy Smasher's airman's cap, flight goggles, and red cape, making him a super variation of the American soldier. By obstructing Spy Smasher's face, Beck and Parker are also allowing the reader to impart themselves onto the character, to fill in the missing identity with their own. While Republic would not be able to get away with creating an entire film serial where the lead character's face is hidden, a similar method of audience association was utilized. As well, the primary conflict of the comic book story, in

which Spy Smasher combats The Mask's plot to steal secret Naval documents, is adapted as an obstacle within episodes of the serial. The character and series, like Captain Marvel's comics, communicate with the reader, imparting a pro-America message that promotes an idealized militaristic figure capable of defeating anti-American forces. Though aspects of character, plot, and backstory were not transferred identically to the serial versions of Captain Marvel and Spy Smasher, these comic book origins established the symbolic value superhero figures hold when imparting a cultural message to citizens.

CHAPTER 7

THE ANALYSES OF CAPTAIN MARVEL

The Players, Plot, and Purpose

"What a field day for the kiddies this will be! They'll revel in the fantastic adventures of its super-human hero, and it's likely that many adults will find themselves just as eagerly interested" ("Adventures" 26). This was how the *Showman's Trade Review* presented episode one of *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* in 1941, proclaiming it to be "Great Juvenile Fare" (26). Though the review is attempting to sell the film to exhibitors, the sentiment is not wrong. The serial is an energetic, effects-filled adventure that lured viewers back into theaters week-after-week with a long form mystery. Beginning in the mountain ranges of Siam (resembling California hills and valleys more than the jungles of Thailand), an exploratory expedition of archaeologists uncover an ancient tomb. Primary among these explorers is Billy Batson, a teenage radio reporter and assistant, whose name and general attitude are basically fidelitous to the comic book source material. Batson's close friends Whitey and Betty, as well as Tal Chotali, Dr. Lang, Professor Bentley, Malcolm, Howell, Fisher, and Carlyle round out the party. Once the expedition descends into the tomb, a secret compartment housing a golden scorpion statue is discovered. Billy Batson also encounters an ancient wizard called Shazam, who grants him the powers of Captain Marvel to forestall the curse of the scorpion. The explorers swiftly discover the curse to be one of greed, as the idol is capable of turning any matter into solid gold, a capability which they agree to render impossible by splitting up the lenses that power the idol amongst themselves. A mysterious traitor lurks among them, however, confusingly also named the Scorpion. Over the course of the next eleven chapters, Batson and his superpowered alter ego, Captain Marvel, struggle to

halt the Scorpion's plans to steal the lenses, while also attempting to discover the Scorpion's identity.

Commonplace for the serial format, the *Adventures of Captain Marvel's* archetypal, as opposed to complex, characters function as plot devices, providing no drama, but, instead, bodies to be endangered, eliminated, or suspected of hiding under the Scorpion's hood. At least, on the surface that is what they appear to be. On a subtextual level, these characters act as symbols within a morality myth for American culture. The dual identities of Captain Marvel and Billy Batson, who are contrasted with the faceless Scorpion and his henchmen, also impart an instructive paradigm about what qualifies as American "good" and "evil." Additionally, the split representation of Captain Marvel and Batson is an inculturation myth about the divide between the average citizen and the idealized hero, providing a totemic symbol to aspire towards. Releasing prior to America's involvement in World War II, the film is not an overt attempt at propaganda in the way that *Spy Smasher* is, but signifies an equally valuable example of cinema, specifically the comic book adaptation serial, being used to convey a societal value system.

Billy Batson as Everyman

The marketing campaign for *Captain Marvel*, jointly facilitated by Fawcett Publications and Republic Pictures, was responsible for generating a fair portion of interest in the serial by sending out posters and banners to exhibitors, all of which featured vivid color images of Captain Marvel, himself ("Marvel" 26). On the day of the first screening, theaters also "distributed 2,500 copies of *Whiz Comics* magazine to all children who attended," with each copy not only displaying the good Captain on the cover, but also on advertisements for the serial within the comic's pages ("Marvel" 26). Similarly, nearly every shot within the

trailer for the serial is of Captain Marvel ("The Adventures"). A child living in 1941 would have, given all of these marketing materials, been forgiven for thinking each episode would feature Captain Marvel for nearly the entire runtime, but that child would have been wrong.

In actuality, Billy Batson receives a majority of the screentime and so becomes the centre of the serial's symbolic significance. Republic chose to slightly alter their interpretation of the character from the one appearing in the comics, aging the adolescent Batson of the comics up by casting the twenty-five year old Frank Coghlan, Jr.⁶ for the role. Coghlan, who had previously appeared in *Public Enemy* (1931), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), and the Our Gang and Andy Hardy film series, recalls, during an interview for *FILMFAXplus* magazine, that "they called me up and said I had the job as Billy Batson. I guess because I looked more like the cartoon character than most young guys, plus I was old enough to work 18 hours a day" (Henderson 60). The restrictions that come with child actors likely did play a part in Coghlan's casting (more so than his resemblance to the illustrated character, as the two share few similarities), but a secondary, thematic benefit also accompanied the twenty-five year old. Being young enough to appear relatable to the teenage and adolescent audience members, but adult enough for older male viewers to connect with, the serial's version of Batson becomes a true Everyman. Also, with Batson being the human, secret identity of Captain Marvel, he becomes the analog or perspective character for the viewer. Aware that Republic Pictures ideal customer base was children and middle to lower class males, Batson's representation is vital to the film's message.

In chapter one, "The Curse of the Scorpion," Billy Batson is introduced along with the serial's other lead characters in a roll call title sequence that is frequently utilized by all

⁶ Coghlan was only a year younger than co-director William Witney, who was twenty-six at the time of filming.

three of the major sound serial studios. The general structure of these roll calls involves pairing shots of the actors, who are "in character," against a blank cyclorama or backdrop with a superimposed credit and character name. Batson's introduction is preceded by Captain Marvel's, which is not surprising given the character's titular billing, but the juxtaposition does immediately ask the audience to contrast the personalities of the two characters. Where Captain Marvel is stoic and confident, posed with his arms on his hips and his chest pushed forward, Batson is physically thinner and shorter. Coghlan makes a performative choice to begin the shot with an uncertain, almost questioning glance and his mouth slightly agape; the viewer's initial read is that Batson is less sure, not as determined as the grimacing visage of Captain Marvel. The distinction between the two is pushed further when Coghlan's thoughtful gaze turns into a wide grin, displaying the character's innocence, good nature, and, above all, sharp difference to the unsmiling, somber Marvel. In two simple shots, Witney and English have established who the audience wants to be (the powerful, commanding Marvel) and who they sympathize with (the average, friendly Batson).

The tomb sequence of "The Curse of the Scorpion" expands Batson's signified value further. When Batson is first seen within the actual narrative portion of the film, he is again placed in contrast with other characters. Batson is younger than the rest of the expedition, outside of his peers, Whitey and Betty, which distinguishes his character from these gentlemen archeologists, a distinction that becomes important as each of them become suspected traitors. Upon entering the tomb, the archaeological party uncover a stone inscription that is translated by Tal Chotali to read, "Let what reposes behind this stone remain hidden from the eyes of mankind for all time" (*Episode One 8*). These words establish the scorpion idol, which rests behind the stone inscription, as a destructive force,

but also one that humankind, once having seen the idol, will be tempted by. Billy Batson, hearing the warning, wisely decides to leave the tomb, telling the others, "I don't want any part of this" (*Episode One 9*). The script makes a point of having Malcolm ask Batson if he is afraid, to which Batson says, "Well, no sir," distinguishing Batson's Everyman as wise, not scared (*Episode One 8-9*). John English, who by Coghlan's account in *FILMFAXplus* shot "more of the dialogue," chooses to frame Batson in a close-up, sparsely used until this point, telling the audience the character's decision to leave is important because it is the decent option (Henderson 61).

At the end of reel one, Batson's choice also leads him to discover a secret compartment that houses the sarcophagus of Shazam. During the encounter between Batson and Shazam, the dialog and framing subtextually completes the definition of the Everyman. Shazam describes Batson as the one "who did not pry into the secret of the Scorpion," as opposed to the other explorers who "violated the Tomb" (*Episode One 11*). With the tomb opened and the temptation of the scorpion idol unleashed, Shazam informs Batson that "It is . . . [his] duty to see that the curse of the Scorpion is not visited upon innocent people" (*Episode One 11*). Batson clarifies, "My duty?" (*Episode One 11*). Significant for the time period, the screenwriters' choice to use the term "duty" references a military and nationalistic connotation, as in combat duty and duty to country. As well, Witney and English shoot Batson from a high angle, diminishing him in comparison to Shazam, while also visually indicating that he is still young, still short of his true potential.

Informative in the same way that the latter *mise-en-scène* choices are, the alterations made to the evil force Batson is enlisted to defeat betray the filmmakers' thematic purpose. Not an entirely fidelitous translation of the comic book material, the replacement of the

Seven Deadly Enemies of Man with the singular golden scorpion idol alters the serial's intentions. Condensing the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man into a single symbol was likely a budgetary and narrative requirement, but also simplifies the signification of evil or culturally distasteful qualities, allowing the viewer to impart their own unique signified values onto the scorpion idol. The idol is simultaneously a representation of greed, power, destruction, and any number of other negative attributes, simplifying the thematic message for easier comprehension, making it applicable to a diverse range of viewers. Lacking any overt connection to the European conflict of the time period, the scorpion is not directly attached to Germany or the Axis Powers, but could have been read this way in 1941 America. Not entirely a propagandistic sentiment, the generality of the symbolism is more accurately a preparedness message. Symbolically rich, this scene establishes the foundational inculturation value of the film. An avatar for the average citizen, Batson's moralism is valued by the cinematic language and dialog, but is also established as only a starting point. To combat true evil an American citizen's duty is to become stronger, more resilient, more steadfast, to embody the values of Captain Marvel.

The Meaning of Marvel

Captain Marvel is the counterpoint to Batson's Everyman, a totemic, heroic figure for American viewers to idolize. For Captain Marvel's symbolism to be effective, Republic Pictures had to make sure the screen version was believably superhuman, no small feat when adapting a comic book character that could fly, call down bolts of lightning, and heft immense objects with minimal effort. In order to create a live action Captain Marvel, Republic relied on the physicality of stuntman Davide Sharpe, the special effects genius of Howard and Theodore Lydecker, and the performance of Tom Tyler. Together these elements of mise-

en-scène created a symbolic model for the impressionable audience to strive toward in order to become a cultural ideal.

Frank Coghlan, Jr., William Witney, Louis Currie, and William Benedict are all on record, along with numerous serial film historians, praising the valuable efforts of Dave Sharpe in bringing Captain Marvel to life. Raymond William Stedman describes the invaluable physicality of Sharpe's performance in his book, *The Serials*, writing that:

"Much of the credit for the exciting action should go to stunt hand David Sharpe, who with the utmost verve overwhelmed the baddies by diving upon them from midair, somersaulting under their chins, and hurling in their direction anything from a machine gun to a fair-sized tree. . . .It was the most successful illusion of such aerobatics ever put upon the screen, in serial or feature" (127)

On the surface, the illusion Stedman is describing intends to convince the viewer of Marvel's superhuman abilities on a syntactic level. Sharpe had to make it appear that the character could fly, a trick that William Witney recalls in his autobiography was accomplished by Sharpe "running, hitting a hidden beatboard (springboard) and diving over the camera into a net," among other techniques (184). Because serials were shot fast and cheap, Sharpe was essentially a one man stunt crew, doubling for not only Tom Tyler, but other actors, as well, including Louise Currie during a scene with a sinking car (Currie 136). Sharpe would also double for Tyler during key shots in fight scenes, selling each punch, leap, and kick to make sure Captain Marvel's superior strength and agility were unquestionable.⁷ No matter the situation, the intention was for Captain Marvel's power to appear realistic, but impressive.

⁷ R.M. Hayes and Francis M. Nevins both write about how one of William Witney's defining characteristics as an action director were the influences he took from Busby Berkeley musicals. Witney would shoot sections of a fight scene individually, instead of shooting the sequence wide and letting the staging play out. This choice emphasized, through close-ups, the agility and bodily motion of the characters. (8-9; 199)

David Sharpe was only a portion of the illusion, however. When he would bound off of his trampoline and sail into the air, the Lydecker brothers' took over.

Recognized by serial historians, including Alan G. Barbour, as the preeminent special effects team in Hollywood, "Howard and Theodore Lydecker created miniatures that were vastly superior to those being done by the major producing companies. Their secret was in building large-scale. . .models and shooting them outside against natural backgrounds" (193). As Barbour describes, the brothers understood that naturalistic effects required an incorporation of natural elements, a method that was regularly used when depicting Captain Marvel flying across an extended distance. Reusing an effect from *Darkest Africa* (1936), a serial the Lydeckers had previously worked on, a Captain Marvel mannequin was created "in a flying position. . .with an arched back and legs straight out with arms extended in front," that was pushed down a set of wires, approximating flight (Witney 183). A prominent example of the effect can be seen in chapter five, "The Scorpion Strikes," when, near the Biltmore Garage in Los Angeles, the Marvel dummy was flown from street level up to an adjacent rooftop (Henderson 62). The stiffness of the mannequin is obvious, but is masked by a camera tilt that tracks with the action and the fluidity with which the mannequin moves up the wires. While not entirely naturalistic, the Lydeckers' dummy was far more grounded in reality than if they had chosen to animate the flying scenes.⁸

The final component of the Captain Marvel equation was the actor portraying him, Tom Tyler. Remembering Tyler, William Witney focused on the actor's physique, rather than his performative talents, writing that he "was clean cut, six-foot-four, and had a

⁸ For the 1948 *Superman* serial, directors Thomas Carr and Spencer Gordon Bennet chose to animate shots of Superman flying. Fluid illustrations though they may have been, this choice immediately announced the fakeness and fantasy of the character and serial.

beautiful muscular body" (182). He certainly looked like the comic book illustration, complete with a broad chest, ink black hair, and a prominent chin. Roy Kinnard suggests that English, Witney, and the screenwriters realized that "Tyler's dramatic ineptitude and almost insurmountable problems with delivering his lines" could deflate the Captain Marvel persona, so "by reducing Captain Marvel's dialogue to the barest possible minimum. . . .the character seem[ed] more mysterious" (65). Hurst echoes the sentiment, writing that "The character was not given to words where action would suffice" (95).

The product of Sharpe, Tyler, and the Lydeckers accentuated the masculinity that separated the sound era serial from the silent era, suggesting a perfected male hero, a strongman spectacle whose feats of bodily power impress and entertain. Subtextually, however, the character signifies control, confidence, and responsibility. Audiences may have been excited by the illusion of superhumanity embodied in Captain Marvel, but they were also being told how and when these powers should be utilized.

Inculturation Through Contrast - Batson vs. Captain Marvel

Anyone who attended the *Adventures of Captain Marvel* serial could dream about ricocheting bullets off their chests or soaring through the sky, but they were well aware these abilities were unattainable. Instead, Marvel's powers act as allegory for peak, male physicality and the restraint and determination to use it for righteousness. The idea of force as power is certainly an American notion, especially if read as metaphor for militaristic might, and so the suggestion that strength should be used sparingly, but in the service of stopping "evil," becomes a poignant, preparedness message for 1940s, pre-war culture. Nowhere in the serial is such a message more apparent than in the final chapter, "Captain

Marvel's Secret." After seeing the Scorpion destroyed by his own idol, Tom Tyler is allowed to deliver a rare and lengthy speech that summates the serial's symbolism:

This Scorpion is a symbol of power that could have helped build a world beyond man's greatest hopes. A world of freedom, equality and justice for all men. But in the greedy hands of men like Bentley, it would have become a symbol of death and destruction, then, until such time when there's a better understanding among men may the fiery lava of Scorpio burn the memory of this from their minds. (*Episode Twelve* 17-18)

Immediately after discarding the idol into the heart of the Scorpio volcano, Captain Marvel vanishes, leaving Billy Batson sapped of his superhuman alter ego. The destruction of the idol and the removal of Captain Marvel's abilities are purposefully juxtaposed with the above speech as a means of connecting them; just as the idol's power could corrupt, so too could the abilities granted by Shazam. The conclusion is that what separates Batson and Marvel from the Scorpion or other evildoers is the discipline with which they wield the power, content to release it when their call of duty is finished. How and when Batson calls on the powers of Shazam is determined, instead, by necessity. On two occasions, in episodes two and ten, Batson is depicted throwing the first punch against the Scorpion's henchmen, defeating them in fight scenes without the aid of Captain Marvel. As well, he chooses to rescue Betty from a sinking ship in chapter eleven without the assistance of super powers. Seemingly, if the task is not beyond human capability, Batson will solve the problem himself. Among other examples, these instances empower the Everyman, conveying that he, too, can be the hero, like Captain Marvel. Witney, English, Tyler, and Coghlan's distinct choice to separate the characters of Batson and Marvel enforces the latter notion. Any time that Batson and Marvel transition, the filmmakers use a match cut masked by pyrotechnics as opposed to a dissolve, which would have suggested that Batson transforms into Marvel. By using a match cut, Batson only appears to swap places with Marvel. The suggestion is enforced by the

performances of Tyler and Coghlan, who share almost no gestural similarities and act confused post-transition, as if they had not been party to each others' previous actions. Distinguishing the characters presents Captain Marvel as a mythic symbol for the hero archetype, not Batson's superhuman identity. Captain Marvel inspires Batson, Whitey, Betty, and others in the same way he is intended to affect the audience of the serial. Batson is the Everyman while Captain Marvel is the totem, the latter influences the former, generating a symbolic narrative that impresses upon viewers that they, when needed, should aspire to meet the cultural expectations embodied in Marvel.

These sentiments are largely ignored when the sound serial is studied, with scholars instead choosing to highlight the escapism of the form or their own nostalgia. Rather, because the sound serial was directed towards children and the working classes, presented as popular entertainment, what the format says about the culture and *how* it says it is a valuable artifact of inculturation. No more so than when the message became pointedly propagandistic.

CHAPTER 8

SPY SMASHER RALLIES AMERICA

Serials Get Drafted - The Post-War Paradigm

Once American had entered into World War II, ambiguity left the serials, as Richard M. Hurst describes below:

If the themes of patriotism, sacrifice, and a glorification of Americanism were noticeable in previous serial efforts. . .then it might be said that in Spy Smasher these themes became all pervasive. . . Since it was the first Republic serial production released during the war, any flimsy pretense of neutrality which might have watered down the message was unnecessary. (97)

According to William Witney's autobiography, *Spy Smasher* commenced shooting on December 22, 1941 (204). William Witney was assigned as the sole director on the film, minus his frequent directorial partner, John English. As reported to Jody Stone of the *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, the serial's production period lasted for thirty-eight days (3). In *FILMFAXplus*, writer Charles Lee Jackson, III explains that Witney finished shooting on "January of 1942, slightly over budget" and only a little behind schedule (39). Time was of the essence for the twelve chapter serial, as the race was on for studios, especially purveyors of B grade cinema, to produce content relating to and championing the war effort. In contrast to the *Adventures of Captain Marvel*, *Spy Smasher* was released in a post-involvement America, as the government had officially joined the conflict in Europe in January 1942, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Jackson, III, sets the stage for the political climate of the time period, both for American society and the Hollywood film industry, writing in *FILMFAXplus* that:

The horror of Pearl Harbor was all too recent, and the Second World War was crashing down around us. Hollywood was gearing up to operate what would later be looked at as a propaganda machine big enough to tackle the lies of the German High Command. For the next three years, every studio. . .would

grind out scores of pro-United Nations titles. . . .But little old Republic Pictures got there first, thanks to that caped spy-crusher. (36-37)

Premiering on April 4, 1942, *Spy Smasher* was, in slight opposition to Jackson, III's statements, preceded in January by Universal's *Don Winslow of the Navy* (1942) and in February by Columbia's *Captain Midnight* (1942). Both of these serials contained American heroes battling against the forces of the Axis Powers, but neither conveyed their messages in symbols that were as iconic or marketed as competently to children as *Spy Smasher*. Neither of these serials were adapted from comic book source material, either, with Don Winslow first appearing as a newspaper comic strip and Captain Midnight as a radio program⁹; Jackson, III, and I make this distinction because of the superheroic costuming and mythic symbolism derived from *Spy Smasher*'s comic book appearance that are not present in the realism of *Winslow* or *Captain Midnight*.

Advertising for the film was direct, selling the pro-American message as it simultaneously sold the film, itself. *Motion Picture Daily*, an industry trade journal, reported that the rights to the *Spy Smasher* character were purchased from Fawcett Publications on Friday August 28, 1941, indicating an interest and expected desire for overtly nationalistic characters and concepts prior to American involvement (2). Even though "Universal. . .made an offer to Fawcett for a package of rights to *Spy Smasher* and *Bulletman*. . .Fawcett, pleased with the success of *Captain Marvel* and with the excellent business relationship it had fostered, decided instead to sign with Republic" (Jackson, III 38). Since Republic had found success with their previous collaborative marketing venture with Fawcett, the two companies embarked on a similar campaign for *Spy Smasher*. As early as August 2, 1941, the

⁹ Both of these characters would go on to star in their own comic book series, however; a clear attempt to further connect with adolescent audiences.

Showmen's Trade Review was already promoting *Spy Smasher* (even prior to the official rights purchase), noting that Republic was halting pre-production on a Robin Hood serial in favor of *Spy Smasher* ("Four" 25). The studio's choice to delay and eventually scrap the Robin Hood serial suggests an awareness of the cultural value in properties that did or could promote American values. Following the serial's release, "Fawcett's participation in this campaign include[d] full-page ads in all their comic books, announcing the new "Spy Smasher" serial," each with a mailable coupon that was intended to inform the company of theaters without showtimes for the serial, who would then be contacted ("Exhibitors" 22). Continued advertisements, as outlined in the July 4th *Showmen's Trade Review*, included:

Every possible means of plugging the serial. . . such as spot announcements and radio interviews; street ballyhoo with "Spy Smasher" impersonator [sic] passing out handbills in front of schools; 1-sheet posters placed on bulletin boards in schools; special advance ads and publicity stories in newspapers; coloring contests in newspapers with passes as prizes. ("Exhibitor" 26)

As saturating as these strategies were, the intention was clearly to target children, not only engendering repeat business from a viable consumer base, but directing the propagandistic content of the film towards impressionable minds. Upon buying a ticket and attending each week of the twelve part serial, children and adults both were told the heroic story of Alan Armstrong, the American secret agent known as Spy Smasher.

Plotting the Propaganda

Unconcerned with MacGuffins or mysteries, like *Adventures of Captain Marvel* or other serials, *Spy Smasher's* installments follow the costumed hero attempting to stop the plots of a Nazi agent called The Mask. Assisting Alan Armstrong are his twin brother, Jack, the Commissioner of Naval Intelligence, Admiral Corby, and Corby's daughter (and Jack's fiancé), Eve. Among The Mask's efforts are plots to destabilize currency, torpedo Naval ships, destroy munitions factories, and utilize special camera equipment to spy in on

governmental briefings. Specific to the period in a way that the generalized criminals and masterminds present in other comic book serials were not, The Mask and his schemes presented a thinly veiled allusion to the Nazi threats of the era. Diegetically utilizing a similar metaphor to that of Billy Batson and Captain Marvel, Spy Smasher and his brother communicate to the audience that a transition between Everyman and hero is required in order to win World War II. Heightened by the immediacy of the threat, this theme acts as an allegory for American soldiers who were asked to fight overseas. Like Whitey and Betty, Eve, Admiral Corby, and, especially, Jack are influenced and inspired by Spy Smasher's actions, becoming perspective characters for the viewer and metaphoric examples of the nationalistic service alluded to through the film's propagandistic flourishes. During a screening of the recut feature version of the serial, *Spy Smasher Returns* (1966), Witney offered his own opinion on the impact *Spy Smasher* and serials like it had on viewers, saying simply "My generation won a war with them" (Stone 3).

Patriotic from the Start

In retrospect, Witney may recognize the persuasive message of *Spy Smasher*, but his autobiography attests that his initial thoughts on the production were slightly different, writing that "There was so much flag waving and propaganda that I thought the whole thing stunk" (202). Witney's characteristically candid sentiment, outside of openly admitting to the film's propagandistic intentions, also explains that Republic and Herbert J. Yates, not Witney, were behind the serial's message. By Charles Lee Jackson, III's account, Yates was "a patriot of the first order," whose original intention for *Spy Smasher's* opening was even less subtle than the serial's already revelrous title sequence (39). Both Jackson, III and Richard M. Hurst explain that Yates had contacted J. Edgar Hoover about recording a

monolog that would appear before the beginning of episode one. Quoted by Hurst from a transcript of the speech appearing in Jack Mathis' *Valley of the Cliffhangers*, Hoover's closing line would have been: "Spy Smasher symbolizes American patriotism in action against those subversive forces which may be far from imaginary" (98). Deemed unnecessary prior to filming, the speech was cut out. Hoover's comments were redundant anyway, only announcing what the serial imparts subtextually.

The title sequence that does begin *Spy Smasher* is no less rife with patriotic sentiment. Scored with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, each episode establishes a primary motif of the serial immediately. The iconic opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth (dun dun dun duh) are matched on the screen with a dot dot dot dash symbol. Not only does this symbol visually recreate the notes from the score, but also the Morse Code equivalent of the letter V. As well, when the *Spy Smasher* title card appears in the foreground, the background features rays emitting from two searchlights in a V formation. During the period, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was popularly known as the Victory Symphony, signaling to any 1940s audience a motif of success. Not only does the score pervade all twelve episodes, becoming *Spy Smasher's* personal theme, the dot dot dot dash symbol is attached directly to the character. One of the important alterations made to *Spy Smasher* when adapting him from the comic book page is the addition of a belt buckle with a V . . . - emblem on it, as pointed out by Jackson, III (39). Crests or iconic symbols are a defining trait of superheroic characters, no less so in regards to *Spy Smasher*, as the V . . . - symbol he wears is imbued with the signified values of victory, Americanism, and the rousing sentiment of Beethoven's Fifth. The final episode of the serial is even entitled "V . . . -," and features an uncharacteristically stylistic embellishment in the final scene. Fading into a shot of Admiral Corby's office, a non-

diegetic projection of the V. . . - symbol appears on the wall; it's almost as if the effort to inspire nationalistic sentiment was so strong the internal logic of the world breaks apart to allow it.

The Clothes Make the Message

Before the latter flourish, the serial is far more grounded in its approach to delivering its jingoistic message. Beginning immediately after the aforementioned title sequence, chapter one, appropriately named "America Beware," utilizes the traditional serial roll call of characters. As with the *Adventures of Captain Marvel*, the cast is introduced one by one, starting with Alan Armstrong's Spy Smasher. Kane Richmond, who plays the part, appears onscreen attired in his Spy Smasher costume. Aside from the cape and diamond symbol on the character's chest (both of which are recreated from the comic book), Richmond's costume is composed of everyday clothing items, altered to a minor degree. Among those alterations are the inclusion of triangular lines on the character's sleeves, resembling a V shape, a design element also present in the neckline of his cape; he is draped in victory symbolism, enhancing the character's association with that signification¹⁰. Spy Smasher's makeshift mask, comprised of a standard issue air force flight cap and goggles, provide the character a direct link to the American armed forces, associating his actions in the serial with soldiers in the minds of the audience. Though Kane Richmond is billed simply as Spy Smasher, in the roll call sequence he removes his flight cap and goggles to reveal his civilian identity, showing that he, too, is only a man. Where Captain Marvel and Billy Batson were separately distinguished, Alan Armstrong and Spy Smasher are shown to be the same person. Jack

¹⁰ When divided horizontally, even Spy Smasher's diamond symbol becomes two mirror image Vs.

Armstrong is noticeably absent from the roll call sequence, however. Partially, this is due to a narrative twist later in the episode where audiences think they are seeing Alan, only to discover he has a twin brother. Since Kane Richmond played both roles¹¹ his single billing also manages to encompass Alan, Jack, and Spy Smasher. By condensing these three personalities into a single actor, the serial consequently links them together as a single symbol, an essential aspect of the Everyman/hero divide.

Kane Richmond - All-American Actor

Kane Richmond's star personality was carefully constructed for the dual role, as well. He had to represent both a rough and tough man-of-action and a homegrown American. Republic managed to find both in Richmond, as the "Hazard Hero" article in the trade journal *Hollywood* manages to showcase. In the article, Richmond's interview is carefully manufactured to subtextually convey specific propagandistic aspects. Richmond is presented as an All-America, said to have been born in the midwestern city of Minneapolis and having attended "the University of Minnesota and St. Thomas College of St. Paul, at which institutions he distinguished himself in football and swimming" (Smithson 54). Richmond's personality is then both wholesome and athletic.

The physical requirements of filming a serial are also used as means of framing Richmond as a resilient, persistent performer and male figure. Two specific stunts, one where Richmond was asked to collapse onto a hill of bricks and another where his ankle was sprained running up an incline, are mentioned to exaggerated the bodily toll the production process requires (Smithson 53). By stressing Richmond's determination to finish the shoot,

¹¹ An actor named James Dale stood-in for whichever brother was not facing the camera during shot reverse or wide shots that involved both Alan and Jack. (Jackson, III 41)

the actor is made out to be a rugged personality, a trait that is then vicariously extended to Spy Smasher and Alan Armstrong. The article also concludes by focusing on Richmond's wartime awareness, mentioning that he is "particularly concerned with the way the war's been going in the Pacific," explaining his interest by stating the he has "got a lot of friends down there" (Smithson 54). Aside from reminding readers of the war and linking the conflict to *Spy Smasher*, Richmond's statement also gives him a connection to service men, a relatable quality for citizens on the homefront. Solicited to exhibitors, the article was not widely read, but does convey the exact blend of characteristics that were advertised and symbolized within the Jack/Alan paradigm.

Ripped from the Headlines!

Within the serial's narrative, the propaganda continues with a specificity previously absent from other Republic releases during the pre-war period. "America Beware" begins in "Paris - Under German Domination," localizing the events of the serial in a conflict that was occurring during the release. Spy Smasher is introduced stealing documents from a German occupied mansion, only to be caught and tortured. Witney and the screenwriting team of Ronald Davidson, Norman S. Hall, William Lively, Joseph O'Donnell, and Joseph F. Poland¹² include a dialog exchange between Spy Smasher and a German officer, following an off-camera insinuation of torture, that conveys the character's commitment to his country. The German officer demands Spy Smasher admit to being an American secret agent. Spy Smasher's resolute "No!" is matched with a deliberate dolly into a close-up, that both creates tension through delay and emphasizes the struggle to resist that Kane Richmond displays in his performance. A seemingly minor exchange actually acts as a fantasy scenario to reaffirm

12 Hall and Poland also worked on the *Adventures of Captain Marvel*, as they were Republic staff writers.

the American citizen of the military's determination, but also utilizes *Spy Smasher* as a model for soldiers to aspire towards; if *Spy Smasher* can resist, so can I! Sentenced to death by the German officer, Armstrong is kept alive by a French Captain named Pierre Durand. If *Spy Smasher* is a representation of American militaristic values, then Durand signifies a similar set of values for France. During chapters three and four, Durand and *Spy Smasher* operate side-by-side to defeat German agents stationed in the fictional French territory, Martinidad. Competently working in tandem, *Spy Smasher* and Durand become an allegory for an idealized wartime partnership between the United States and France that reflected the allied nature of the two nations at the time. None too subtly, *Spy Smasher* also saves Durand from being hanged by the Germans upon arriving in Martinidad, an example of Republic's views regarding America's entry into World War II.

Another major motif of historical propaganda that runs throughout the twelve chapters of *Spy Smasher* is the presence of foreign submarines off the coasts of the United States. The Mask's command center is located on one of these submarines, which becomes a set piece for action sequences during chapters three, eight, and twelve. Around the release of the film, a cultural fear of German and Japanese submarine attacks on American industries arose from accounts of failed attempts by both countries. Within *Spy Smasher*, Witney, his screenwriters, and Republic have The Mask plot to enact attacks that are highly reminiscent of these real life occurrences. An interview with Kane Richmond from the trade journal *Hollywood*, relates a story where, during a coastal shoot, "one of the stunt men piped up and said he'd be willing to bet he'd just seen a periscope less than fifty yards away!" only to find out "that the Navy had bombed a Jap[anese] sub off Redondo Beach" shortly afterwards (53). The interview and scenes from the serial simultaneously remind viewers of actual events,

while providing a fantasy solution to them, one that happens to reassert the steadfast capabilities of the American Navy. Richmond's own account within the interview also has the added benefit of making the actual business of filming the serial sound dangerous, associating the production with the war effort itself. The serial then becomes an extension of the war effort, which makes any attendance or, in the case of the journal's intended audience, exhibition of the film a contribution to America's fight. Chapter twelve, "V. . . -," concludes with a pyrotechnic set piece off the California coast, where The Mask's U-Boat is attempting to torpedo American military factories. What initially seems like an anti-climactic choice, Spy Smasher is not the cause of The Mask's defeat and demise during the sequence. While Spy Smasher is fighting a German agent on a speedboat, The Mask's U-Boat is attempting to retreat from his failed attack, only to meet death at the hands of underwater mines laid by American forces. Even though Spy Smasher may have assisted in defeating The Mask, the villain's death is brought about by real munitions and tactics used by the American Navy, a diegetic choice that instills confidence in the armed forces' ability to protect the country.

Villainy Unmasked - Propaganda of the Bad Guy

Assuming the role William C. Cline refers to as the Villain, The Mask acts as another propagandistic component to defining Spy Smasher's heroic signification. Where other classic serial villains are shrouded in mystery, like The Scorpion, leaving a blank signifier to be filled in over the course of the plot, The Mask first appears in the roll call sequence sans the concealment of his infamous white veil. Instead, the face of actor Hans Schumm is clearly displayed scowling menacingly into the camera. As well, Schumm is adorned in a uniform reminiscent of Nazi attire. Where other serial villains' identities are left ambiguous, allowing the audience to view them as an icon of evil and all that is associated with the term,

The Mask's signification of evil is located in a singular person and ideology. Germany is pointedly associated with villainy in *Spy Smasher*, pinpointing exactly who and what the character, and by proxy the American military, is supposed to defeat. Also unlike The Scorpion¹³, The Mask was directly adapted from the comic book source material. Choosing to use The Mask, as opposed to creating an original villain for the serial, Republic made a conscious decision to recreate the content of the comics, which was openly negative about its portrayal of Germany and the country's aggression with the United States.

Relating to the portrayal of villainy within *Spy Smasher* is a question of the morality inherent in the depictions of murder inflicted upon these villainous characters by the protagonists. By representing The Mask and his henchmen as German (or, at least, Fifth Columnists), *Spy Smasher* is allowed to kill them with impunity, both within the narrative and on a metalingual level. Murder is excused when perpetrated upon villains, but, especially, German agents, within the serial. Viewers are taught, then, that murder of this kind is not punishable, but, instead, appreciated. Not only are audiences trained to value German lives less than the lives of other nationalities, but any guilt felt by soldiers or associates of soldiers is expunged. By way of a propagandistic defeat of the villains, *Spy Smasher* lessens any moralistic tension viewers might have regarding the taking of another life in a wartime situation.

Duality of Brothers - Everyman to Every-Soldier

Alan G. Barbour points out in *Cliffhanger* that "Unlike the comic strip, Republic screenwriters gave *Spy Smasher* a twin brother" (193). A major alteration to the source material begs the question, "Why did Republic feel the need to add Jack?" R.M. Hayes, in

¹³ The Scorpion would later be brought into the Captain Marvel comic books, due to the popularity of the Republic serial. (Henderson 60)

The Republic Chapterplays, explains how "line producers and writers, in accordance with studio management, created the style, look and sound of the Republic serials," making Jack's inclusion a studio choice (8). Opposite the purposeful divide between Billy Batson and Captain Marvel in *Adventures of Captain Marvel*, Kane Richmond was cast in the dual role of the Armstrong brothers; Alan Armstrong's Spy Smasher is, literally, the same person as his twin brother, Jack. Trick photography creates the illusion that physically separates Jack from Alan, first, in "America Beware," by shooting Richmond in each brother's costume from a stationary angle. Then each of Richmond's profile shots are overlaid, making it appear as if the brothers are standing together in the same train car. In the chapters that followed, William Witney would use doubles or stand-ins to insinuate the presence of both brothers simultaneously. Regardless of the uniquely cinematic pleasure of seeing an actor portray two characters, the duality of the Armstrong brothers carries a thematic and propagandistic purpose. By having Richmond portray Alan, Jack, and Spy Smasher, Republic is suggesting to the viewer that these characters are both different and similar, that the superior bravery and skills of the hero lie within the Everyman, too.

Barbour and R.M. Hurst have suggested that Republic chose to create Jack for the purpose of sacrificing him at the end of the serial (193; 98). Undoubtedly, a theme of sacrifice is present in the narrative, especially when Jack takes on the Spy Smasher mantle, only to be killed in the process. Alan and Eve's final lines in chapter twelve suggest as much:

Alan: "I only wish Jack were here, to know we did succeed."

Eve: "He must know, Alan. I'm sure of it."

Eve's reassurance vicariously assuages any doubts held by American citizens that the sacrifices of relatives and loved ones lost during the war were in aid of a final victory. These

sentiments, though poignant for the time, are only a portion of the larger dichotomy created by Alan and Jack. The train car scene, where the brothers are first visualized in contrast to one another, not only establishes the plot point of the Armstrong twins, but also a visible difference in personality and representation between the two. When Jack is introduced in "America Beware," a few core characteristics are established through exposition. Primarily, Jack is announced as being engaged to Eve Corby. By basing his character in a relationship, the script announces him as committed and a romantic. As well, Jack explains that he is returning to Eve and Admiral Corby's house in Lakeside Junction. Alan describes Lakeside Junction as being of little military importance, but, by doing so, also insinuates the town as a non-metropolitan location, the stereotypical American hamlet. By associating Jack with a small town local, the character is further established as an Everyman. Kane Richmond matches his performance to these characteristics, playing Jack with an eagerness and geniality that are not present in Alan's stern, somber attitude; it is a subtle differentiation, but one that distinguishes the brothers from one another. On a societal level, Jack is also represented, both in attitude and attire, as an average American citizen. He is portrayed in common, middle class clothing for the day, a suit, vest, and hat, that separates him from Alan's garish Spy Smasher costume and Airman's leather jacket, when out of uniform. Regardless of these designations, Jack still manages to participate in the action. Assigned a special deputy position by Admiral Corby, Jack is allowed to aid Corby and his brother in the struggle against Nazi collusion within American borders. Though Jack is often depicted fighting alongside his brother, Spy Smasher is clearly the character who drives the plot forward. Episode four, "Stratosphere Invaders," as an example, contains a scene where Alan requests Jack relay an encoded message to Admiral Corby in order to decipher it, rather than

Jack taking the initiative himself. Alan regularly provides the plans, directing Jack and the others on how to complete them.

In order to rescue Eve within the final chapter of the serial, Jack even goes as far as wearing his brother's Spy Smasher costume, completing his transformation into a nationalistic hero. Narratively, the serial intends Jack to be indistinguishable from Alan within this final chapter, to make the viewer think Spy Smasher is who gets shot to death. Removing any differentiation between the two brothers by draping them in the symbolism of the Spy Smasher costume, the insinuation is that anyone can defend their country. Effectively, the Everyman becomes the Every-soldier.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

William Witney, when interviewed by Tom Weaver for *Monsters, Mutants and Heavenly Creatures*, returns to a question he once received from an audience member during a serial screening:

one of the people said, "Mr. Witney, you must be very proud of the *art form* that you started in the serials." And I said. . ., "*Art form*?" For Christ's sake, there was no 'art form' in those! . . . And everybody got mad. . . . The "art form" of the serials----Jesus! (283; emphasis in the original)

Witney's frustration is understandable. He was a workman director who came up through low budget cinema as a production assistant, he cared little about art and, certainly, found no use for the concept in his films. Critical and scholarly views of serial films, especially those within the superhero genre, commonly echo Witney's own viewpoint, discussing the films as relics of a time past, efforts of ingenuity, and little else. Due respect to Witney, scholars, and critics alike, but these films, though possibly not objects of *artistry*, did converse with a section of the American middle class population in a way similar to works of art. *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* were popular entertainment and, as such, were inherently seen by a good portion of the moviegoing public of forties America. Any messages conveyed through symbolism or diegesis then impacted a sizable portion of the culture, asserting or reasserting ideals or sentiment. The Everyman was told by these films that he could become more, a hero the country required to overcome enemies who represented everything un-American. In short, these films contributed to the shaping of what 1940s America defined as nationalism.

What is more, the form and the genre continued to impact the culture into the post-war eras. Even though Republic discontinued production of any superhero genre serials

following *Captain America* (1944), the Superman, Blackhawk, and Batman serials from Columbia would continue to utilize iconic characters for cultural purposes. Future research into these films and their impact on late forties and early fifties America would continue to reframe the importance and value of not only the sound serial, but also the comic book adaptation. Some sound serials were even recut into feature length films for re-release during the sixties, extending the impact of the material to an entirely new audience and cultural context. Roy Kinnard and William C. Cline write about the most popular recut revival, *An Evening with Batman and Robin* (1966), but further study could be applied to other reissued serials and how these films and their messages were recontextualized for new audiences. The methods of inculturation and propaganda I have examined within *Adventures of Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* have continued into contemporary cinema, as well. These serials laid a foundation for the superhero genre that has dominated the box office since 1999, a genre that continues to converse with American culture through monomythic symbolism and iconography. Films like *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Avengers* (2012), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and countless others from the superhero genre continue to act as metaphorical and allegorical fantasies for a post-9/11 American society, just like *Captain Marvel* and *Spy Smasher* did for pre- and post-war cultures. However, these films also share the same critical and scholarly distaste as those latter serials. Counter to any critical misgivings, these contemporary superhero genre entries deserve equal scholarly appreciation, as they, too, are seen by and attempt to persuade large portions of the American public. Witney may have scoffed at a conflation of art and serial, just as scholars today dismiss the superhero genre, but these films are widely seen and that reach holds cultural weight. Time and study will tell, but that lone

audience member who confronted Witney may have been onto something; the serial and the superhero may be recognized as art forms yet!

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