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Book Review: Superheroes of the Round Table

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Superheroes of the Round Table: Comics Connections to Medieval and Renaissance Literature, by Jason Tondro, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2011, 248 pp., US\$40.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7864-6068-7

Jason Tondro begins his book with a joke about meeting texts on their own terms, so in the spirit of meeting *Superheroes of the Round Table* on its own terms, this review begins with a riddle: “What do you get when you cross a superhero comic with a modern romance? Two copies of *Action Comics #1*.” In other words, superhero comics and the modern romance are one and the same, the modern incarnation of the medieval romance, or so Tondro argues over the course of 226 pages. His chief aim is to highlight “the relationship between the superhero romance and its Medieval and Renaissance forbears” (2). In some cases, this relationship seems obvious—as when Tondro compares Arthegall’s yron man in *The Faerie Queen* to Marvel’s Iron Man—while in others, the relationship might seem a bit forced—as when Tondro says that Batman is like Lancelot because he takes over the mind of Desaad, one of Darkseid’s minions (199). While some of Tondro’s claims might be a bit tenuous or unclear, his book is nonetheless a valuable addition to the emerging field of comics scholarship.

Tondro’s introduction is perhaps the high point of the book. In the space of 18 pages, he makes his boldest, clearest, and most insightful claims while still supplying concrete examples along the way. Like most comics scholars, Tondro begins by justifying his enterprise to a potentially skeptical audience. He fashions his imagined audience as one comprised of medieval scholars who might deem superhero comics too lowbrow to merit consideration and superhero enthusiasts who might normally dismiss the high-falutin’ pageantry of the medieval romance. The comics fan, of course, can appreciate superhero stories in new ways by learning about older stories that have served as source material. Perhaps more surprisingly, Tondro says, “Knowledge of the superhero romance also has something to teach critics of the traditional literary canon” (2). For Tondro, the romance genre has existed for millennia in an unbroken line; the genre merely adapts to its surroundings, as a snake sheds its skin and grows a new one.

Following the introduction, Tondro leads with his best foot forward. Chapter one, the chapter with the sharpest focus, deals primarily with *The Faerie Queen* and a specific *Iron Man* storyline. Here Tondro does some of his best work as he explains the importance of allegory in the romance genre, whether medieval, renaissance, or superhero romance. He digresses at certain points, but by the end of the chapter he comes back around to his argument that both *The Faerie Queen* and superhero comics deal with dense allegory and larger-than-life characters who perform miraculous feats. Both attempt to educate the reader: “Spenser’s heroes . . . demonstrate the very best virtues that human beings can attain, and they do so at a breakneck pace. That is an excellent template for a crackling good superhero comic.”

After the first chapter, the book loses some of its focus but none of its passion. While Tondro provides a number of individual insights as he performs close readings of his texts, the chapters seem to lack a thesis of their own. Whether discussing the similarities in Jack Kirby’s comics and Ben Jonson’s masques (chapter two) or graphic adaptations of Shakespeare (chapter three) and Arthur (chapter four), the book continues to supply beneficial intertextual analysis, but each chapter might stand poorly on its own. Fittingly, the book’s final chapter, in which Tondro discusses Grant Morrison’s different adaptations of the grail quest, is perhaps the murkiest yet also the most fervent. He analyzes various comics storylines by Morrison using Mallory, Wagner, Wolfram, and Chretien as reference points, yet for much of the chapter Tondro seems to say little more than “This story is an example of a grail quest.” Like Morrison, Tondro has

particular ideas in mind, but those ideas are occasionally implicit. As he brings the chapter and the entire book to a close, however, he begins to wax poetic, bringing the book to a fever pitch and offering a final consideration for his reader: “What, then, is the Holy Grail we need? . . . We cannot destroy a part of ourselves, and perhaps that very part which makes our lives most interesting. . . . Instead, all experience—all literature—is to be swilled, blended, mixed in a cup and drank until we are a creature of many thousand hands, multi-colored eyes, a thousand stories and infinite shapes, yet one” (226). At the closing of his book, Tondro advocates for an egalitarian view of art—humanity must bring together all experiences in all forms in order to find redemption. *Superheroes of the Round Table* is perhaps a step in that direction.

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