

## A BOY AND HIS GOD: THE PROMISE OF MASCULINITY IN *CAPTAIN MARVEL*

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### Abstract

Film and popular culture critic Bob Chipman has argued that, during the Golden Age of comics, one of the primary draws for many readers was the relationship between the adult-male hero and his young sidekick. Many boys, left without present fathers during the 1930s and '40s, found ersatz masculine role-models in the superheroes of the day, particularly those who mentored a young sidekick, as with Batman and Robin. While Chipman's theory accurately explains one strong appeal of comics characters such as Batman, Superman, or Captain America to young boys, it does not account for the interest in one of the most dominant figures of the Golden Age: Captain Marvel.

The best-selling comics star for a number of years in the 1940s, Captain Marvel was a super-strong, flying champion of justice, who in reality was preteen Billy Batson. The relationship between boy and man was, therefore, markedly different for the Fawcett Comics publication. In this analysis, the author examines the precise nature of the relationship between Marvel and Billy through the lens of 1940s-1950s masculinity in comics and culture, examining how the Captain alters and adapts the traditional heroic role of the ersatz-father to provide an idealized version of self-reliant maturity.

It would be hard to deny that comics and the superheroes that populate them have been a major cultural force in the eight decades since their premiere. For those who study such movements in popular culture, one of the primary issues has been why comic books in particular succeeded so well. Superman first debuted in *Action Comics #1* in 1938, and in less than five years he and his ilk were starring in radio, film, and enough individual titles to flood the market and reach millions of readers. What was it that allowed the superhero to rise so high and so quickly? Numerous scholars and creators such as Brad Wright, Grant Morrison, James Gilbert, and many others have pointed to the identification of the reader with the superhero and/or his (or, rarely, her) alter-ego. In a similar vein, film and popular culture critic Bob Chipman has focused on the identification of readers not with the adult hero, but with the young sidekick, who is closer in age and character to the largely juvenile audience. He suggests that the boys who bought and read comics during the Golden Age (1938-1954) often lacked a paternal figure at home, as their dads had left either to find work during hard times or to fight abroad. When reading about Robin's adventures with Batman (or about Bucky, Speedy, *et cetera*) the boys found a much-needed father figure in the adult superheroes, who were both fathers and friends to the audience-insert characters

(“Sidekicks”). Chipman’s theoretical framework is valuable not only because it refocuses the conversation regarding identification on the young boys who formed the target audience, but also because it deals with this immersive aspect in terms of masculinity; a concept that was undergoing a great deal of flux at the time. Yet while Chipman’s frame speaks to the appeal of numerous figures such as Batman, Superman, Captain America, and so on, it does not entirely explain the phenomenon of Captain Marvel, perhaps the most popular hero of the Golden Age. The appeal of Captain Marvel and his alter-ego Billy Batson lies in his naïve interpretation of masculinity, in contrast to the patrician model endorsed by Superman, *et al.*

To read the writings of social commentators and contemporary academics, the interwar period in America was not a particularly good time to be a man. The passage of women’s suffrage, changing social roles in the domestic sphere, and the invention of the teenager all contributed to the impending sense of crisis. And things did not improve once the Great Depression began.

Wages plummeted and relief rolls swelled. The unemployment level rose from about 16 percent in 1930 to just under 25 percent barely three years later and remained almost as high for the rest of the decade. With nearly one in four American men out of work, the work-place could no longer be considered a reliable arena for the demonstration and proof of one’s manhood. And many men

simply lost faith in the system that prevented them from proving their masculinity in the only way they knew.” (Kimmel, 140).

And while WWII provided some chance for economic, if not personal, security in the form of regularly-paid positions for soldiers, the newfound social freedom of women left behind only further complicated things. Where the wife was a domestic force to be reckoned with before the war, now, she was also a member of the public sphere at the cost of masculine hegemony. The fear of feminine power, and the masculine isolationism necessary to repel it, featured prominently in popular works from the period, including a number of comic books. One later issue of *Captain Marvel* featured an evil witch who attempted to trick the do-gooder into marriage, whereupon she would control him and be free to run amok.

[The witch’s] plan to render Captain Marvel powerless through marriage is cast specifically in the terms of the domestic ideology’s masculine norm. In other words, the male breadwinner role is inherently emasculating, and male powerlessness against the wife’s control is assumed to be a part of marriage in this parody... Thus, male freedom outside marriage is presented as directly counter to female freedom and power obtained through marriage, and the latter is evil (Best, 82).

Although often comedic, the overarching characterization of female control as

inherently opposed to male freedom was indicative of a very real fear among the male population of the pre-WWII period.

In answer to this dread, artists Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created an invincible male. This titan could meet bullets and bombs with a hearty chuckle, outperform the greatest feats of humanity's ingenuity, or change the very shape of nature itself. And he hid behind the façade of a regular white collar-worker. Scholars such as Michael Kimmel and Grant Morrison have argued that, while Superman himself serves as a form of wish-fulfillment, the true secret to the Kryptonian's popularity lay in his secret identity: Clark Kent. "The man behind the S—a man with a job, a boss, and girl trouble. Clark the nerd, the nebbish, the bespectacled, mild-mannered shadow self of the confident Man of Steel. [Siegel and Shuster] had struck a primal mother lode" (Morrison, 9). And, through the vehicle of their four-colored avatar, male readers could not only experience an existence of (imaginary) omnipotence, they could also view a world where female power was neutralized. As the mild-mannered, cowardly Clark, the hero pursued the frigid Lois Lane, an attractive, self-sufficient female who easily embodied the powerful woman. Yet this same powerful figure dashed endlessly after Superman, who refused to be ensnared by anyone's womanly wiles (as seen in the first pages of *Action Comics #1*, when the newborn character brushes off a murderous *femme fatale* without a thought). In a cycle that would provide regular material for the hero until their marriage in the 1990s, "Clark constantly pursued Lois Lane, seeking the

comforts of marital stability, [while] Lois had eyes only for his more manly alter ego, who could not, and would never be tied down into a life of domestic drudgery. What Clark craved, Superman avoided" (Kimmel, 154). Though Superman was the first of his kind, a slew of similar characters who sought to repeat his success soon followed. The vast majority served comparable needs for their readership, if not the exact same ones. Heroes were typically super, and rarely allowed their lives to be disrupted by figures of the female persuasion.

It is worth noting that superhero comics were almost entirely male-oriented. Whether readership statistics accurately reflected such views or not, audiences were perceived by publishers and creators alike as almost entirely male. Female comics readers were assumed to prefer romance tales and similar stories, which publishers were quick to capitalize on, but girls were rarely considered an important factor in superhero-related epics. With that said, subsequent sidekicks and hero-adjacent females were introduced as the stars of their own series, but they remained relegated to the second string throughout the Golden (and Silver-, and some of the Bronze-, Dark-, and Modern-) Age. Moreover, these superwomen were often pigeonholed into domestic, or domestically-oriented, roles. While these comics and the men who created them were products of their age, and a number of progressive movements can be identified in the history of the medium, the common dismissal or outright misogyny of comics has been and remains a primary concern of scholars. Following the publication trends of Fawcett and other

comics producers in the 1940s, however, the remainder of this essay deals primarily with males and their understanding of the world, as those are the issues that concerned the creators and what they assumed to be their readers at the time.

Returning to masculinity, for all their fantastic elements a cursory inspection of these publications shows that they contained a fairly mature tone, especially in comparison to the stories that would typify the Silver Age. While the individuals in the tales presented might be figures of bright wonder, their worlds did not share the same distinction. The Golden Age version of Superman, for example, was less the messianic figure that he would become.

Siegel and Shuster's original character was actually a tough and cynical wise guy, similar to the hard-boiled detectives like Sam Spade who also became popular during the Depression years. Superman took to crime-fighting with an adolescent glee, routinely taking the opportunity to mock and humiliate his adversaries as he thrashed them (Wright, 9).

Like his noir forbearers, this tough and violent hero was the only appropriate answer to the world in which he existed. The big city in which he operated was not a utopian wonderland, but one in which a man had to fight "for social justice, [while] traditional authorities appeared slow, ineffective, and occasionally even corrupt...Superman's America was something of a paradox—a land where the virtue of the poor and the

weak towered over that of the wealthy and powerful" (Wright, 13). Whether the comic book focused on the hero fighting corruption and theft or on the defeat of the Axis powers, the universe was one "with a cynically realistic base: Once the odds were appraised honestly it was apparent you had to be super to get on in this world" (Feiffer).

While a highly lucrative trend, consumed by people of many ages, superheroes of this type were noticeably close in tone to the adult-oriented pulps, which some early creators were quick to realize left a field of younger readers lacking in characters to which they could personally relate.

Batman creator Bob Kane ... and [his assistant Jerry] Robinson "were, naturally, concerned with boosting sales and attracting younger comic readers. For the Batman writers and illustrators, the most logical, practical, and ultimately successful solution to this readership quandary was the creation of an exciting, death-defying kid who would lighten both the look and tone of Batman (Tipton, 322-323).

As with Superman, Robin quickly proved to be a trendsetter, and youthful sidekicks (of nonspecific ages, usually a young teenager or what today might be called a pre-teen) soon became a staple feature of comic books. The various Boy Wonder-analogues provided for young boys—the assumed readership and primary target audience of the comics—an escape like that which Superman provided for the Clark Kents of

the world. The sidekicks showed a reality in which young boys could not only go on amazing adventures with their super-fathers, as Chipman argues, but also one which was uniformly masculine. In recalling why he did *not* identify with young Dick Grayson, Jules Feiffer notes that “while I lived in the east Bronx, Robin lived in a mansion, and while I was trying, somehow, to please my mother — and getting it all wrong — Robin was rescuing Batman and getting the gold medals. He didn’t even have to live with his mother.” Feiffer, by his own admission, may have been somewhat of an outlier among young readers, but the salient point is that not only did the comic character enjoy a charmed life, but it utterly lacked a feminine influence. Like their older compatriots, young comics readers could escape from the malign influence of the dominating mother, an alternate expression of the dominating wife, and a concern discussed in greater detail in James Gilbert’s *Men in the Middle* as “Momism.”

As an orphan, young Billy Batson was also free of the maternal influence. Following a strange figure into a mystic subway station one night, he meets the ancient wizard Shazam, who selects the boy as his successor. Any time he shouts the word “Shazam!” (an acronym of the names Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury), the child is struck by lightning and transforms into the fully-grown superhero Captain Marvel. His alter-ego possesses super-strength, near invulnerability, flight, super-speed, and a number of other generic attributes that would ultimately result in him being litigated into oblivion in 1953 by Superman

owners DC. Yet this seemingly derivative series regularly outsold Batman, Superman, Captain America, and the other titans of the Golden Age that are remembered today.

Introduced in *Whiz Comics #2*, the tale of Billy and the Big Red Cheese “started a series of well over 1,000 stories featuring either Captain Marvel himself or other members of the Marvel Family...Peak circulation was well over 2,000,000 copies per issue—a figure never reached by any other comic before or since [at least until 1987’s *Death of Superman*]” (Lupoff, “The Big Red Cheese,” 63, 67). This massive success, which includes the honor of being the first comic superhero to cross to the silver screen, suggests that Captain Marvel spoke to a desire in his readership better than other comics of the time. The question, then, is what role the Fawcett character served so well?

Some of the answer relates, no doubt, to the process of identification itself. When first drawn by creator C. C. Beck, Billy Batson was very simplistic. He appeared as “an oval-faced, dot-eyed, squiggly-haired boy familiar to any child who ever sent for a how-to-draw-heads course” (Feiffer). This is an extreme form of visual simplicity, in which the primary features such as eyes and mouth are presented clearly enough to create identity and function, but in a manner that is so far abstracted from the real world that it allows for a much greater degree of reader immersion, according to comics scholar Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*, ch. 2). In these terms, young Billy almost appears to be a case study of iconicity, and this visual technique may have worked in

conjunction with the innate appeal of a superpowered character one's own age to draw in greater numbers of young readers. In addition, Captain Marvel had another advantage in his competition with Superman.

In terms of reader identification, Superman was far too puritanical: If you didn't come from his planet you couldn't ever be super — that was that. But the more liberal Captain Marvel left the door open. His method of becoming super was the simplest of all — no solar systems or test tubes involved — all that was needed was a magic word: “Shazam!” (Feiffer).

Indeed, Jules Feiffer (“Introduction”) and Grant Morrison (*Supergods*, 32-33), among others, independently recall attempting to use Billy's powers on their own, walking around as boys shouting out “Shazam!” in a childish hope. While Feiffer responded to the spell's failure with disappointment, and Morrison poured through dictionaries in search of a working spell, both are representatives of what was almost certainly a near universal phenomenon among readers. After all, what reader, child or adult, could honestly resist trying the word once, just in case.

While these aspects of the many titles published under the Marvel Family banner go some way to explaining their appeal, they nevertheless fail to take into consideration the crisis of masculinity that was occurring in the American psyche during this time period. Through examining the precise

relationship between Billy Batson and Captain Marvel, it becomes clear that the characters speak to the gender-based concerns of the readership in a unique manner. In contrast to the “typical, heteronormative father and son dyad” that describes Batman and Robin, Superman and Jimmy Olsen, and countless other heroes of the day, the stories in *Whiz Comics*, *Captain Marvel Adventures*, and *The Marvel Family* did not star that eponymous Captain (Tipton, 326).

Billy Batson was the real hero of all the Captain Marvel stories, from the first issue until the last...Without Billy Batson, Captain Marvel would have been merely another overdrawn, one-dimensional figure in a ridiculous costume, running around beating up crooks and performing meaningless feats of strength like all the other heroic figures of the time who were, with almost no exceptions, cheap imitations of Superman (Beck).

Billy was not only the protagonist of the tales, but the proper hero. The introductory title page of each comic described for new readers the basic premise of the series, and although the wording used was known to change from issue to issue, they always described the boy as the primary character. One such introduction stated that “to help him in his untiring efforts to overcome wrong-doers and crush crime, Billy can become Captain Marvel at will merely by speaking the magic word: Shazam” (“Make Way for Captain Marvel,” 48). The fight

against crime, and subsequent heroics, were directly stated to be not the province of the giant figure on the book's cover, but to belong wholly to the boy newscaster.

Although one of the most overt instances, this and other introductions portray the story not as one of Captain Marvel versus the forces of evil, but as Billy's fight against the same foe, in which contest the good Captain is but one tool for the boy's use. When an army led by his arch-nemesis Dr. Sivana invades the United States, for example, the hero infiltrates the enemy camp to spy on the enemy generals not in the invulnerable form of the Big Red Cheese (as Sivana, and his creators, were known to refer to the Captain) but as the very vulnerable Billy (*Whiz Comics* #3, 40). His bravery is not limited to braving live battlefields, however, as the child is regularly captured by large thugs and other physically stronger foes that are able to overpower the hero because, so long as he did not say the magic word, Billy "was just a boy. In the early days he was, in fact, rather a *little* boy, although of indeterminate age" (Lupoff, "The Big Red Cheese," 72). This fact did not, however, prevent him from displaying physical bravery as well. In one instance when several of Sivana's goons jump the newscaster, instead of saying his word he turns and "puts up a game fight," punching one of the suited thugs straight in the chin, which at the time rests a few inches higher than the top of Billy's head ("Captain Marvel Crashes Through," 63, see **Fig. 1**). Though quickly overpowered and gagged, he continues to struggle against his opponents. And though he does not always get into fistfights with full-grown adults, the

boy remains defiant in the face of grown foes that have him at their mercy (a regularly recurring dramatic moment in Captain Marvel stories). In one particularly striking instance, a captured Billy stands in front of Dr. Sivana, who is one of the only villains to know that Billy and the Captain are one and the same. Though small and hunched, with a distinct visual similarity to Nosferatu, the villain is still a head taller than Billy and surrounded by his henchmen and diabolical machines. Instead of cowering, however, the young boy responds to him with nothing but contempt. When the scientist pokes at Billy and says "Well, I've got a story for you. And you're going to read every chapter of it—except the last one," the hero responds "If you're writing it, I'm sure it will be most uninteresting." While his statement alone is defiant, the look on young Billy's face is one of utter contempt for his foe. His eyes are closed and eyebrows arched, while his chin juts out in what can easily be imagined to be a scoffing flip of the head in the face of a man who is currently assembling a literal private army. For a child facing truly adult peril, Billy's tone is impressively insulting ("Captain Marvel Battles the Winged Death," 140, **Fig. 2**). In this scene and all the others of his existence, Billy Batson is the consummate hero, despite being a small, young, physically weak little boy.

Fortunately for Billy, when his physical attributes prove to be a hindrance, either allowing grown men to overpower and gag him, or preventing his entry to certain areas on account of age, he has a secret weapon. Upon saying the word "Shazam!" Billy instantly transforms into the physically

grown Captain Marvel. Although the precise nature of the relationship between the boy and man has varied over the years depending upon the author and/or incarnation of the series,

most aficionados are in agreement that Captain Marvel was Billy Batson's alter ego (and vice versa); that in a metaphysical sense they were the same person in two different embodiments; and that in truth Billy did not so much give way to Captain Marvel as become magically transformed into Captain Marvel, retaining even as Captain Marvel, the basic personality and identity of Billy Batson (Lupoff, "Big Red Cheese," 72).

This is an important distinction to make, as it suggests that the appeal of the comic was not Captain Marvel in and of himself. Were he a separate entity, an argument could be made that the superpowered muscleman was the primary attraction. If, however, the Big Red Cheese was only an aspect of Billy Batson, then the boy remains the hero of the series; reader identification rests with Billy as the hero, and thus in his childlike aesthetic, rather than in the physically mature hero.

While this manipulation of identification was never explicitly dealt with in the pages of any Fawcett comics, it was nevertheless clearly expressed visually. Most particularly, the physical similarities between Billy and the Captain were striking (as in **Fig. 3**). When the young boy first entered the subway tunnel and in all future incarnations

he wore a red shirt with a yellow collar. At times this shirt would bear the monogram "BB" in a staggered, overlapping pattern on the chest. After first saying "Shazam!" the boy's shirt became a red tunic with gold cord around the neck, supporting a white half-cape, while a yellow lightning bolt stands vividly in the center of the uniform, clearly transforming the young Billy's sartorial aesthetic along with his physical form.

His face, moreover, also hints at a more precise definition of the relationship between (super)man and boy. As discussed, the youth's face is largely iconic, with only a few defining features. In general, it may be said to be more of a rounded-square than truly ovoid, with some softness to the features. Billy's black hair hangs over a large forehead in several locks. He has black dots for eyes, but they are given definition by thick black brows, and the image is completed with a small-but-noticeable cleft in his chin. Upon transforming, the roundness leaves Billy's face, replaced by a stereotypically manly straightness of lines. Nevertheless, the thick black eyebrows and cleft chin remain, while the black dots have become thin lines of a masculine squint. "With his slicked-back Brillantined hair, he looks like the boy Billy grown up, perfected. He looks, in actual fact, almost exactly like the actor Fred [MacMurray], upon whose features Charles Clarence Beck based those of his hero" (Morrison, 32). This, then, is the true relationship between Batson and his alter ego; Captain Marvel is not an alternate version of Billy, but rather is the child grown physically. Instead of one identity serving as a mask for another—as Batman

masked the identity of Bruce Wayne, or Clark Kent's glasses masked the alien Kal'el—Captain Marvel's face is a magnification or amplification of Billy's. The softness of childhood is replaced by the hardness of masculinity, but otherwise the features remain the same, just as the boy's shirt changes into a man's military-style tunic. The same sort of transmutation marks the changes of the Lieutenant Marvels: Three boys known as Fat Billy, Tall Billy, and Hill Billy who, because they, too, are named Billy Batson, can use the magic word to transform into Fat Marvel, Tall Marvel, and Hill Marvel, respectively. They also have their prepubescent faces infused with magical testosterone and become instantly manly.

It is important to note, however, that none of the Billy Batsons can be said to become adults. Though physically larger and stronger than his alter ego, and indeed almost everyone in existence, Captain Marvel was not what one would call imposing. "A friendly fullback of a fellow with apple cheeks and dimples, he could be imagined being a buddy rather than a hero, an overgrown boy who chased villains as if they were squirrels" (Feiffer). The Big Red Cheese revels in his abilities in a much more wholesome, boyish way than the destruction-prone Superman, using a pair of torpedoes as water skis, for example, or heckling an airliner as he flies past. As he dashes by a plane in a one-panel aside, Marvel waves and shouts "Yah, yah, you can't catch me!" ("Captain Marvel Scores Again!," 82). This scene has nothing to do with the overall arc of the story, nor to the very (diegetically) serious crisis with which

Captain Marvel is engaging. Nevertheless, it is the very thing that a boy suddenly given superpowers would be likely to do. Moreover, he reacts to the rest of the world with the same child-like spirit, especially when it comes to the opposite sex.

When first meeting the appropriately named Beautia, she suggests that he would enjoy being her emperor when she and Sivana eventually conquer the world. The Captain's mouth hangs slack, his eyebrows are arched in what appears to be shock (and perhaps horror) as three beads of sweat fly off his head ("Make Way For Captain Marvel," 52, **Fig. 4**). This is not the reaction of a grown man, much less a powerful superhero, but of a young child who is utterly and horrifyingly out of his depth. Similarly, when the hero saves a young cowgirl in a western-themed adventure, he is offered the standard hero's recompense. The girl throws her arms around his neck and says "You wonderful man, you saved me—I'm going to kiss you." Captain Marvel, visibly trying to pull himself from her embrace, shouts "Help! Help! Shazam!" and the puzzled girl is left holding onto Billy Batson, who safely throws her off the trail ("Captain Marvel Out West," 31, **Fig. 5**). From the perspective of a young boy, this was a close shave as, after all, though he might be the world's mightiest mortal, not even Captain Marvel is immune to cooties.

The Captain is, physically, a man. He has a man's strength, a man's size and stature, and even a man's face. Specifically, it is the face of contemporary film action-hero Fred MacMurray, whose visage was so stereotypically masculine that when he aged out of playing younger roles he was

repeatedly cast as the model 1950s-era patrician. But despite all this, the comic star is clearly *not* a man, remaining instead an overlarge boy.

It is not size or age or childishness that separates children from adults. It is “responsibility.” Adults come in all sizes, ages, and differing varieties of childishness, but as long as they have “responsibility” we recognize, often by the light gone out of their eyes, that they are what we call grown-up (Feiffer).

It is clear to the reader that the Captain is not burdened with any of this weight. Instead, his great power brings primarily great freedom. Indeed, Brian Cremins has argued that “Captain Marvel is often more child-like—prone to mistakes, silly, and immature—than Billy Batson is” (“Captain Marvel and the Art of Nostalgia,” 75). This is demonstrably true as, if nothing else, Billy is the one with a day-job. Still, lack of adulthood for the hero forms the center of the appeal of the Fawcett titles.

Boy readers identify easily with the boy Billy, and through him they are able to escape into an idyllic world without childhood restrictions. In Billy’s life there is no mother to dominate, no school to bore, and no arbitrary rules about bedtimes or diets. Even the paternal figures are benign at worst, such as the dignified but kindly Mr. Morris, Billy’s boss, who gives him assignments and support and disappears from the tale, and farcical at best, as in the case of Uncle Dudley, a “lovable old fraud” and conman who shouts “Shazam!” and

changes into a homemade costume to become the non-powered, warm-hearted comic-relief character Uncle Marvel. Even Billy’s sister, Mary Marvel, the only regular feminine influence in the Marvel titles, has the courtesy to live several blocks away in her own house, appearing only when some familial closeness is desired but never to pester or intrude. And whenever this boy’s paradise might be less-than-perfect, either endangered by outside forces or liable to age- or size-based restrictions, Billy says his word and assumes an adult stature, but remains free of the “responsibility” that characterizes true adulthood. Rather, Marvel is the ultimate child, free of any restrictions or limitations and able to indulge his power in boyish sport and adventure.

And it is Billy’s power that resolves the troubles. Because Captain Marvel is an aspect of the boy, rather than being an external individual, he provides young readers with a vision of themselves and their roles unique among the comics of the Golden Age. Readers could also identify with young sidekicks like Jimmy Olsen, who has every boy’s theoretical potential to one day “be a fine specimen of normative male adulthood. Still, as Superman’s pal he functioned as a different model of inadequate masculinity to play off the superior masculinity of Superman. Thus, Jimmy’s adventures place him repeatedly in danger, requiring Superman’s rescue” (Best, 90). Though strong and impressive, Robin, Speedy, Bucky, Jimmy, and the other boy adventurers were ultimately children who required the protection of the father-analogues to guide them into security and show them the way into the world of

adulthood. But Billy Batson did not suffer from this problem. Billy saved himself. If his wits and courage were not equal to the challenge, he could change his outer aspect into that of an adult. “In the language of ceremonial magic, Shazam! summoned the holy guardian angel—the exalted future self—to come to one’s aid” (Morrison, 33). The Captain was never an outsider to direct the growth of Billy, and through him the reader, but rather was an incarnation of the man that the boy would become. The face of Captain Marvel is the face of Billy Batson with the addition of years, just as that of Captain Marvel would eventually age into the visage of the wizard Shazam, who is the same man minus hair and plus wrinkles and a beard (Beck, refer again to **Fig. 3**). The vision of Billy’s transformation into Captain Marvel, though magical, is nevertheless an inevitability. The Big Red Cheese is, as Morrison suggests, Billy’s “future self,” requiring only the turning of the clock to come into being. And as such, young Batson is not a child to be rescued and reared, but is the self-made man by his own will. Through Billy Batson, young male readers were shown a world where they did not have to rely upon their fathers, absent or otherwise, nor upon their ersatz equivalents, to make them into men. All they required, Billy assured them, was time.

The lack of external influence had another effect on the Marvel vision of masculinity, however. Because Billy brought himself into manhood, neither he nor his readers were reliant upon adults to reach their potential. There was no need, in the world of Captain Marvel, for children to become serious, dour, cynical, or even

particularly responsible as they grew. Because Billy’s transformation was instantaneous, he could avoid the various growing pains that accompany aging. Not for readers of Captain Marvel were the trials and tribulations of acne, puberty, awkwardness, and girl trouble that would come to plague Peter Parker. They could skip all that and become the adult that they knew they would eventually be, without any of the loss of innocence that always accompanies growing up. Because the youth did not require a man’s help to become a man, neither was he required to accept the apparent realities of a man’s world. This innocent worldview was especially impactful during the Golden Age, occurring as it did in the shadow of world-shaking events such as the Great Depression and World War II. The adventures of Billy and the Captain could easily have become dark and serious, since “if the world is filled with villains like Hitler, Goebbels, and Goering, all of whom Billy encountered during World War II, what good is a magic word that forces him to grow up?” (Cremins, “Captain Marvel,” 75). But Billy did not really grow up, he just got bigger and stronger, remaining innocent and boyish at heart, “more like J. M. Barrie’s Peter Pan, the little boy free from the vanity, petty hatred, and the evil of adults” (Cremins, “Captain Marvel,” 75).

In discussing his understanding of the appeal of Captain Marvel, Brian Cremins has argued that it presented a vision of the nostalgic past. Throughout the 1940s, GIs fighting abroad read about “home” in the pages of Captain Marvel, while those on the domestic front could be equally reassured by

the idyllic vision of inevitable Axis defeat. And when these soldiers returned to a home that had been irrevocably changed by war and social forces, the broadcasts from radio station WHIZ provided a glimpse of the simple, innocent life they had lost (“What Manner of Man Is He,” 39-41). This is a strong explanation for the popularity of the Fawcett titles, but it speaks to an adult’s needs, rather than a child’s. Where a soldier returning home might search for an innocence that has been lost, a young boy would seek not to lose it in the first place. This is the promise, and thus the ultimate appeal, of Captain Marvel to children. For juvenile male readers, Billy Batson’s world was not only one without the threat of females—be they mother, wife, or sister—it was one without the threat of alien “adulthood.” No matter what enemy he may face, or how big he grows, “Billy’s magic word allows him to exist in a permanent, idyllic, carefree state of wonder and innocence” (Cremens, “Captain Marvel,” 85). And the figure of Captain Marvel promised that such wonder and innocence would never disappear. In the face of a cynical and dangerous world, the relationship between Billy Batson and his alter-ego/future-self Captain Marvel showed young readers not the idyllic past of their older compatriots, but rather an optimistic future. The hope of eternal innocence and freedom, and the promise of a child’s version of adulthood, is what made Captain Marvel such a phenomenon among readers in the Golden Age, and may be what older, nostalgic readers have sought to recapture.

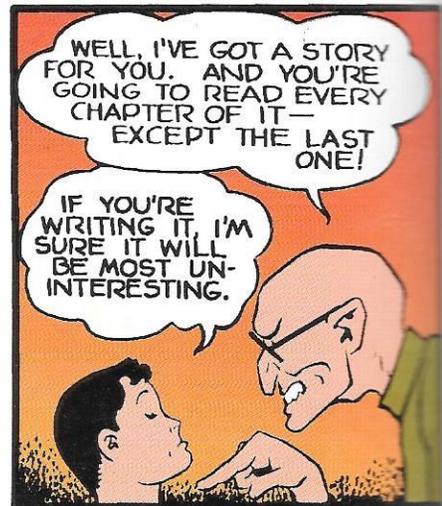
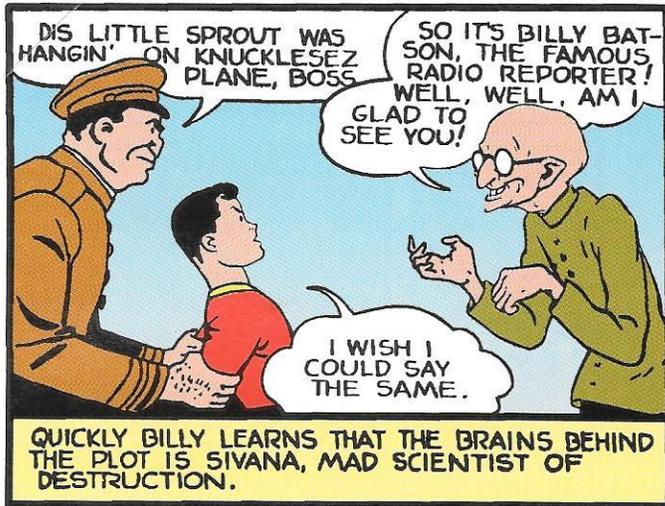
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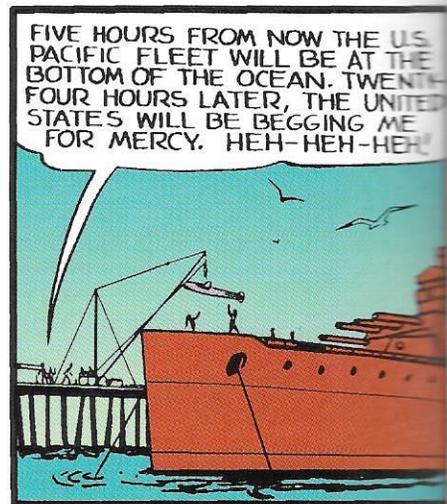
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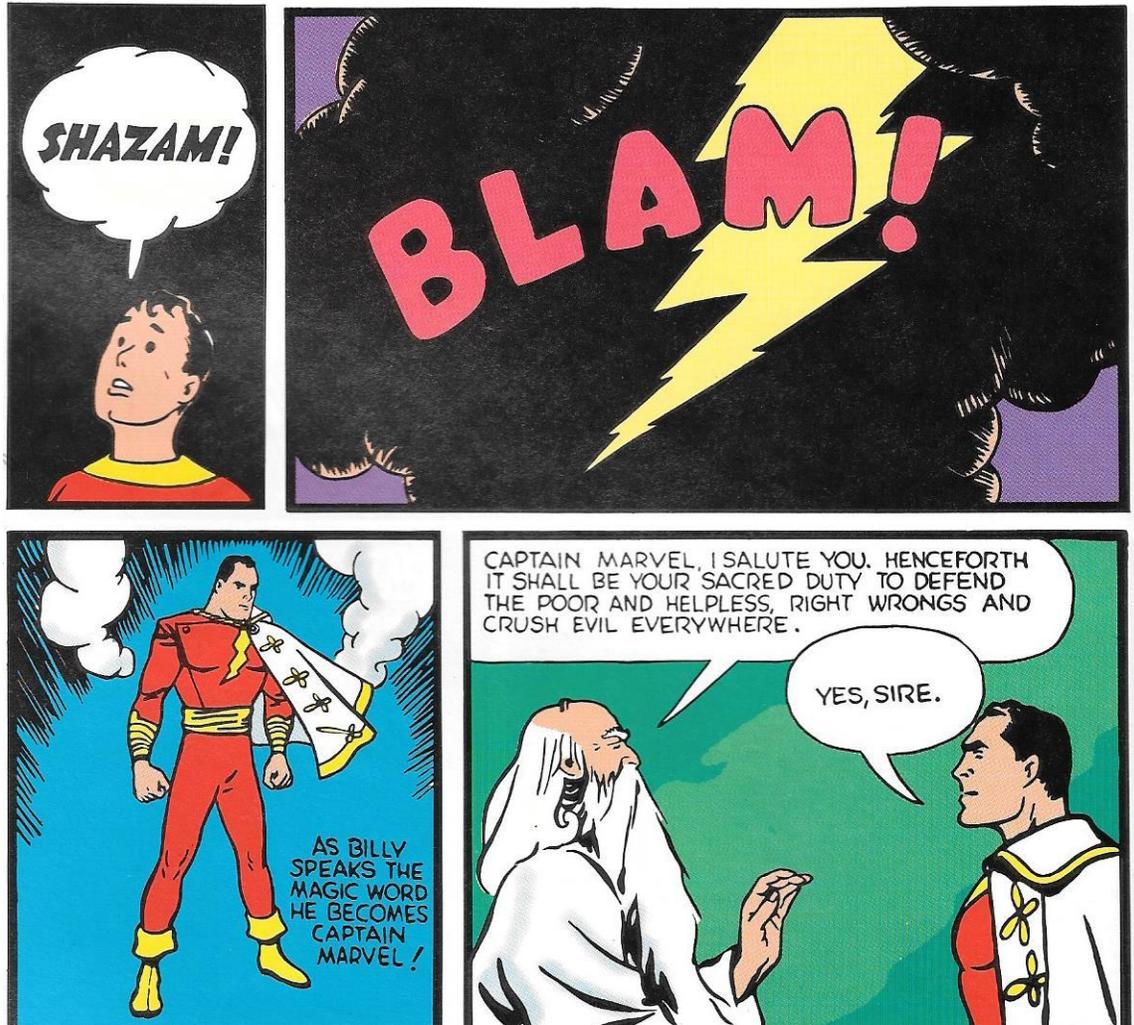
**Figure 1:** Young Billy Batson takes on two full-grown thugs. Parker, Bill and C. C. Beck. "Captain Marvel Crashes Through." *Whiz Comics* #5, in *The Shazam! Archives Vol 1*, DC Comics, 1992, p. 63.



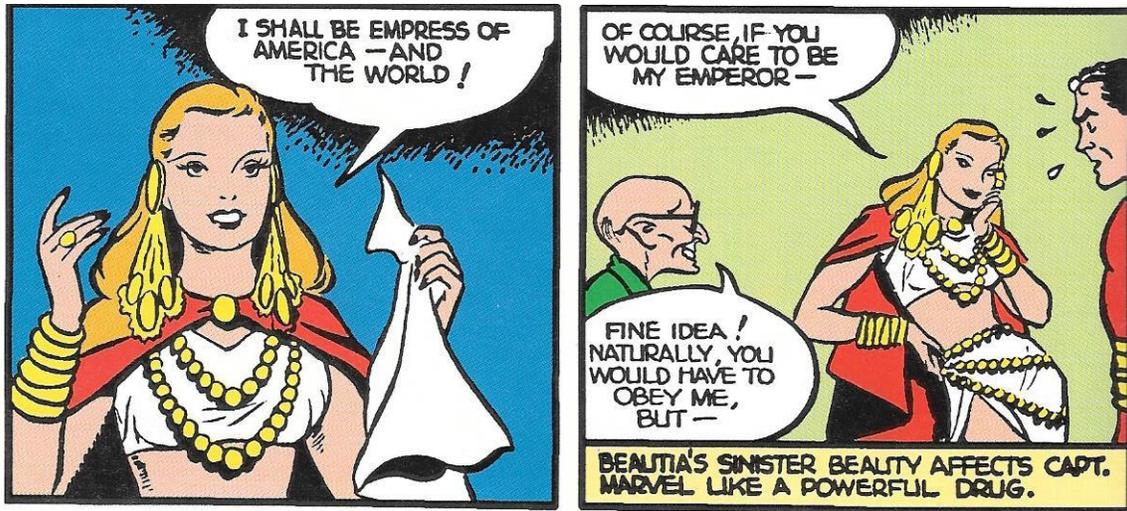
AFTER A WEEK OF HIGH-SPEED PRODUCTION, SIVANA ORDERS LOADED ABOARD HIS PRIVATE BATTLESHIP ENOUGH AERIAL TORPEDOES TO WRECK THE ENTIRE AMERICAN NAVY!



**Figure 2:** Billy defies and insults Sivana. Parker, Bill and C. C. Beck. “Captain Marvel Battles the Winged Death.” *Whiz Comics* #10, in *The Shazam! Archives Vol 1*, DC Comics, 1992, p. 140.



**Figure 3:** Note the similarities between Billy Batson, Captain Marvel, and the wizard Shazam. Parker, Bill and C. C. Beck. "Captain Marvel." *Whiz Comics* #2, in *The Shazam! Archives Vol 1*, DC Comics, 1992, p. 24.



**Figure 4:** Captain Marvel is not comfortable with Beautya’s proposal. Parker, Bill and C. C. Beck. “Make Way for Captain Marvel.” *Whiz Comics* #4, in *The Shazam! Archives Vol 1*, DC Comics, 1992, 47-58, p. 52.



**Figure 5:** A narrow escape! Wellman, Manly Wade (attr.) and Jack Kirby. “Captain Marvel Out West.” *Captain Marvel Adventures* #1. Fawcett Comics, March 1941, 16-31. Uploaded 28 December 2010. <http://comicbookplus.com/?dclid=18340> Accessed 1 April 2018, p. 31.