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The Dragon Lady's Well Favoured Children:The Transition from Corporatist to Individualist In Comic Strips of 1930s

i.

In late 1929, Buck Rogers[1] - hero, adventurer, time traveler, freedom fighter of the twenty-fifth century - signed "The Pact of Perpetual Peace" with the Emperor of the Red Mongols, ruler of the World and chief of medical nobility.[2]

It was no small affair - either in the events of Buck's curious world or in the business considerations of the strip's artists and syndicate. *Buck Rogers* had made its debut not a year before - in January - as a modest incarnation of the common Yellow Peril genre. Buck, a twentieth-century American, had entered a mine shaft charged with a mysterious glowing gas which plunged him into the sort of sleep which made Rip Van Winkle's seem like that of a nail-chewing insomniac. He awakens five hundred years later to find that America and most of the world has been conquered by the Mongol Reds - or Red Mongols, the terms seem to be used interchangeably.[3]

In any case, as Wilma - Buck's futuristic flapper-qua-love-interest - subsequently explains to him, "Many years ago, the Mongol Reds, from the Gobi Desert, conquered Asia. From their Great Airships, held aloft by gravity repellor rays, they destroyed Europe, then turned toward peace loving North America." As she speaks this (off camera), we see in the illustration under her speech balloon a Mongol air-sailor standing at the forward gun of a flying-ship. On the ground below and before him, the Statue of Liberty comes into view. "Begin on that big idol holding a torch, Chang Ling," says his commander via an intercom. "That's their goddess."[4]

"Free" - i.e., Anglo-Saxon - Americans have been driven into the forests and the deserts to live as savages while the Mongols colonized America: "On the ruins of New York, San Francisco, Detroit, and a dozen others, the Mongols reared cities of super-scientific magnificence."[5] But, Wilma hastens to add, the Free Americans have reconstructed their culture in secret strongholds - "The widely scattered and

loosely bound organizations or 'orgs', began the slow process of rebuilding a civilization and recapturing lost science." And now, she concludes proudly, "We are nearing the time when we shall once more strike for freedom."[6]

In fact, in later strips, we will discover that the Free Americans have already a super-scientific magnificent city of their own - Niagara City (later New Chicago), located at the Falls of the same name and whose endless play in power-turbines provides the energy necessary for a vast battery of anti-Mongol-aircraft ray guns. "In the one small spot in all North America safe from Mongol air raids, business and industry thrived," notes the narrator.[7]

This could have easily been the central premise of the strip for the remainder of Buck's existence. Philip Nowlan, who is generally credited as Buck's inventor (adapting him from his pulp novels, such as *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*, a story of race war in the distant future[8]), had united with its first artist, Dan Calkins, to create a pop culture icon who would have been not only good business (the Yellow Peril motif is a sure-fire racist winner even today), but also a feature with, as it were, low overhead and minimal intellectual stress. That is, this early Buck of the Mongols was easy. There was no need for the authors to invent a new and dastardly villain each week - rather, you had neatly at hand the Mongols, backed up now and then by "half-breeds" (Buck meets Wilma while saving her from some of these) and the traitor, "Killer Kane," the white man who does the yellow man's bidding. By like token, you have one consistent set of heroes - Buck, Wilma, the Free Americans - and they face a comfortably predictable set of challenges: each episode could consist of Mongol attack, American Response, and Happy Resolution.

In short, little thinking is required, and that is a very good thing indeed when you are - as were Nowlan and Calkins - tasked with the production of a new strip for every day of the week, plus colour on Sundays.

And yet, even so, Buck would turn his rocket-pack equipped back on this sure thing. In the last episode of the year of his birth, the Yellow Red Mongol Peril would turn into an army of teddy bears. Buck and Wilma would make their way to the palace of the Emperor of all Mongols and confront him with demands for American independence. The Emperor, aghast to discover that Americans are not happy under Mongol rule (he's been lied to by self-serving courtiers) immediately befriends the two American adventurers and their cause. He accepts American liberty with a thoughtful "Well, good friends are better than unwilling slaves or powerful enemies." Wilma, overwhelmed, kisses him on the cheek with a gushing "You old Darling!"

The Emperor, who not a year before would have surely been as sinister as Attila, blushes and stammers like Khruschev before Jackie.[9]

Over the next few strips, the whole of the Mongol business is neatly swept under the rug. The great cities of Mongol colonies are, somehow, forgotten. The Mongols themselves disappear from the strip. Buck and Wilma spend most of their time (the strip ran until 1967, and had a brief afterlife as a TV program) outside of America, free or otherwise.[10] They have their adventures on a succession of *other*-worlds: Mars, the Moon, the deep sea bed (in "The Sunken City of Atlantis" and the "Mystery of the Atlantan Gold Ships", in 1930-31 and 1931 respectively), various earth-like extrastellar planets, and even Jupiter, which somehow becomes not a gas giant with a crushing surface gravity, but rather a verdant jungle world with a curious resemblance to Burma or south China.

What on earth - or rather, given the strip's premise, *off* it - has happened?

The answer is, quite simply, that in the 1930s a radical new sort of hero has appeared within the American popular consciousness as evidenced by that most popular of all the people's arts: the comic strip. And in that new conception, the hero has become something truly alienated and profoundly alien.

Or to put it another way, he has become *Terry & the Pirates*.
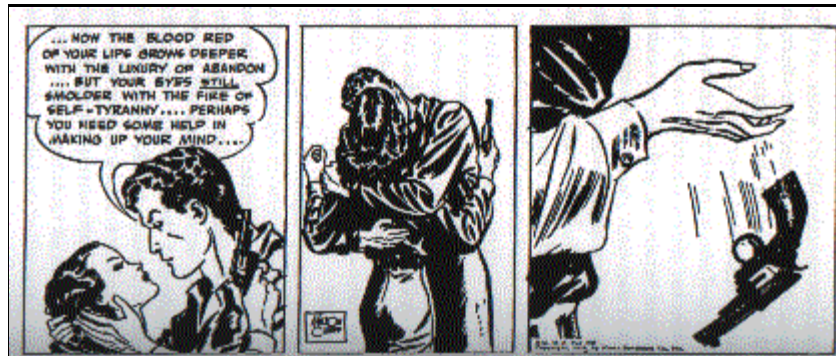
Both Terry, and the Pirates.

ii.

As Buck made his first pilgrimage to Mongol-Asia, the comic as a genre was either already very old, or very new, depending on which frame of reference you choose. The most ardent of the comic strip's partisans will trace the art form right to the beginnings of literacy. Jared Diamond comes very close to identifying bawdy words and pictures on ancient Greek drinking vessels and wine jugs as being among the first examples of popular, non-elite, "people's" literacy.[11] Perhaps you could argue that they were thus the first true comic strips. But comics scholars tend to be less ambitious. They trace the origins of the modern strip to no earlier than the great newspaper wars between Hearst and Pulitzer, both of whom had discovered that people would actually buy papers just to look at funny pictures. And so, by 1900, true multi-panel cartoon strips were to be found in almost every major paper. *The Katzenjammer Kids* from Richard Dirks, and, of course, the fabulous *Little Nemo In*

Wonderland from Winsor McCay all competed for the attention of readers. Through the 'teens and early twenties, they would be joined by such standards as George McManus's *Bringing Up Father*, Bud Fisher's Mutt and Jeff; George Harriman's *Krazy Kat*, Pat Sullivan's *Felix The Cat*, and Rube Goldberg's various devices.

The one thing that was true for all of these comics was that they were "comic." That is, they were funny. The underlying assumption of American strips all through the 1920s was that they were a form of humour. One read them to watch the main character take pratfalls. And, usually, the person ending up face down in the mud was a white male - Jiggs, Mutt or Jeff or both, the Captain of the Katzenjammers, and so on. In other words, the stock characters of the bumbling sit-com father and unsuitable suitor are already well represented in the popular literature of the 1920s.

And that's the way things remained until 1929, when - *very* suddenly - everything changes. Trace, for example, the works of two representative artists, Roy Crane and Elzie Chrisler Segar.

Crane had begun the career with a typical humour strip. In 1923, he introduced *Washington Tubbs II* in which Tubbs, a slightly featherbrained jazz-age adolescent, went from comic disaster to disaster in various crackpot schemes to get rich quick and win the attentions of beautiful women.[12] However, the strip grew more and more grim. Increasingly, Tubbs faced real dangers - being marooned at sea, being threatened by criminals - and by 1927 it was not funny any longer.[13] It was now an adventure. And, in 1929, Crane introduced a new character, the mysterious Captain Easy, a taciturn, square-jawed Southerner (he refers to others as "Suh") who has served in many armies for many causes.

By 1933, Easy had taken over the strip - duly renamed *Captain Easy, Soldier of Fortune*. Tubbs declined into comic relief. The strip (like its ultimate successor, Crane's *Buzz Sawyer*) was a hit.

Consider, as well, the case of Segar.[14] In the middle 'teens, Segar began doing a series of comic strips largely modeled on early films - *Charlie Chaplin's Comic Capers* (for the Chicago Herald in 1916); *Looping the Loop* (for the Chicago American in 1918); and *Midget Movies*, (taken over from Ed Wheelan in 1919), which was then renamed *The Thimble Theater* by the Hearst organization. The original "players" of Thimble were a comic family, the Oyls. There was a mother and father Oyl; a daughter, Olive; her boyfriend, Ham Gravy; and Olive's dimwitted but ever ambitious brother, Castor.

Castor was, in some ways, the star of the strip. A shorter, older, less able, but equally self-assured Tubbs Washington, Castor's life was a succession of disastrous get rich quick schemes ultimately leading to his own mortification. The strip ran with that basic plot until 1929. Then, in the course of yet another treasure hunt, Castor must hire a sailor to transport him to a gambling den where he plans to win big. The sailor's name? Popeye.

Popeye is a clown - even a grotesque one. But he differs from Castor in that he is fundamentally, if crudely competent. He knows what he can and cannot do. ("I am what I am!" he says with Biblical finality.) He is immune to hare-brained schemes. On the other hand, when required, he will put up his fists, and - particularly after the introduction of green leafy vegetables - he will win.

And, very, very quickly, *Thimble Theater* became *Popeye The Sailor Man*. Castor vanished. Ham went with him. Olive Oyl obtained questionable immortality as the Sailor's coy and beanpole mistress.

The point? At the end of the 1920s, and particularly after the Great Crash of '29, there was movement away from comedy in comics - a move toward grimmer, more "realistic" strips - and a move away from strips which (even in jest) celebrated the impotence of their characters.

Apparently, in an age of Depression and uncertainty, readers had no interest in seeing helpless, humiliated people. Those, they could find selling apples or pencils on any street corners.

What they wanted instead, it seemed, was *heroes*.

iii.

At this point, a new character enters the story of the comics - a man as improbable as any of the creatures to stalk the funny papers and adventure strips of his age. Captain Joseph Medill Patterson (1879-1946) must surely rate as one of the most remarkable editors or publishers in the history of American periodicals - which is saying something when you recall that it includes such characters as Hearst and Mencken.


Born into a wealthy publishing family in Chicago, but tormented at prep schools because of his western accent, he came to loathe the American elite and spent several years as a member of the Socialist party - even, at one point, helping to run the presidential campaign of Eugene Debbs.[15] He then turned to writing and journalism, doing several plays on social issues, and, more importantly, spending a year in China to cover the Boxer Rebellion.

He then served in World War I (how he came to have the title Captain), and afterwards returned to the family fold and the United States to run the *Chicago*

Tribune - New York Daily News newspaper empire with his close friend and cousin, Robert McCormick. Like Hearst, with whom he competed ruthlessly, Patterson saw the value of comic strips in building newspaper circulation. Unlike his competitors, however, he early realized the value of strips with continuity - that is, with a story that ran in segments, like a serial novel (of which he was also fond). Readers, he knew, would compulsively return to a paper (and its comics page) to find out "what happened next."

Also different from other publishers, Patterson took a personal interest in his comic strips - managing them almost in the way that a producer manages a film; deciding on the concept, hiring the writer and artist, and keeping a careful eye on content. In another man, this micromanagement would surely have resulted in a ghastly muddle. But Patterson was not another man. He was the pioneer American tabloidist, and as such, he had an almost magical foreknowledge of public taste. He always seem to know exactly how low he could go without bumping his head. The result was, in rapid succession, many of the great comics of the period: *The Gumps* (introduced in 1917), *Gasoline Alley* (1919), *Winnie Winkle* (1920), *Moon Mullins* (1923), *Little Orphan Annie* (1924), *Dick Tracy* (1931), *Smilin' Jack* (1933), and, most of all, *Terry and the Pirates* (1934).[16]

Terry was part of a logical process. Patterson didn't miss much when it came to public trends, and he'd detected the move toward serious adventure comics early on. He'd seen Buck take off (literally and figuratively) in 1929. Even as Buck emerged from his mine shaft - on the same day, January 7, 1929, and from the same syndicate, United Features - Harold Foster's version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan swung into action. In '34, they would be joined by *Flash Gordon*. Then, of course, there was Roy Crane's Captain Easy, who'd been on the scene in a starring role since 1933. (To round out the set, Lee Falk's the *Phantom* would appear in 1936.)
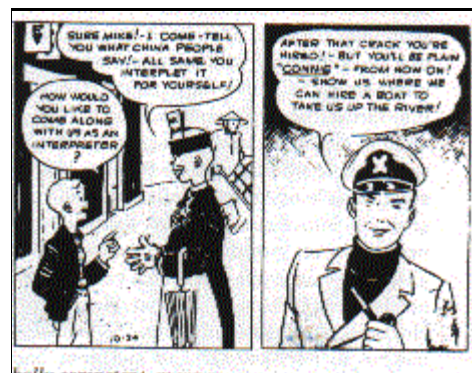
Initially, Patterson introduced strips populated by heroic but familiar American figures in solidly American locales - specifically, Little Orphan Annie, the (infuriatingly) cheerful orphan who overcomes every difficulty with gumption and courage; and Dick Tracy, crime-buster extraordinaire. However, perhaps influenced by the success of Flash, Buck, and Tarzan, Patterson decided to get a Captain Easy of his own - an All-American male, but in someplace *different*.

According to at least one story, his secretary brought to his attention a young cartoonist, Milton Caniff, who was doing another script for Associated Press entitled "Dickie Dare." Dickie was originally a boy who had elaborate fantasies of adventure while reading classic stories of daring-do - Robin Hood, Robinson Crusoe, etc. However, tiring of the concept, Caniff soon had Dickie meet a real adventurer (a mysterious writer named Dynamite Dan) and start having real adventures in exotic locations.

Patterson met the young Caniff and proposed that he do a similar adventure strip for the News/ Tribune syndicate. He had a few directives for the cartoonist - chief

among them being that it *must* take place in China. Depending on which source you believe, Patterson explained that, "Adventure can still happen there."[17]

He also gave Caniff two books to read - *Wuthering Heights* and "a book on Chinese pirates."[18] Comics scholar Robert C. Harvey later identifies this book as *Vampires of the China Coast*, though there seems to be some debate on the issue.[19] But, whatever it was, in it Caniff must have encountered "Ching Shih," the female pirate who was active on the South China coast in the nineteenth century, for when he returned to Patterson with sample strips, he would include as a major character the Dragon Lady, a modern Chinese pirate. Otherwise, the new strip was basically Dickie Dare revisited. The main character, Terry Lee, is an orphan boy who is befriended by a mysterious writer-adventurer, Pat Ryan.[20] They go off to China in search of a gold mine which Terry's grandfather had left him. Their life is then made complex … by pirates.

iv.

Terry's presence in China is always rather mysterious. We know almost nothing about him, other than that he is (like Annie) an orphan. The very first strip of the series, "Introducing Terry and the Pirates," tells us only that he is a "A Wide Awake American boy whose grandfather left him a map of an abandoned mine in China."[21] The same strip allows the other characters of this particular episode to take a bow. We have Pat Ryan, "Terry's Pal, two-fisted adventurer" (the image shows him in yachtsman garb, and he smokes a pipe); and then there's "Dale Scott… who runs the boat on which the treasure hunters sail" (a blonde, American girl, somehow in China); and Poppy Joe, the villain, a "half-caste." Then, too, there's "Ol' Pop Scott, Dale's father," and "George Webster Confucius… better known as Connie," a buck-toothed stereotype who cooks, sweeps, cleans, translates and provides comic relief.

The adventure that follows is brief - Terry and Pat, with Connie, go "Up river" with Dale and Ol' Pop. They meet and struggle with Poppy Joe. Ol' Pop dies. Poppy Joe is defeated. The adventurers return to the coast.

Brief, but also important, for it will establish the model for everything else that happens in *Terry* until 1941. In one form or another, each of the characters in this first strip will reappear time and time again. Ol' Pop's dead, but there are always lovable (and not so lovable) old guys to dispense wisdom in Terry's China. Poppy Joe is vanquished, but there are various warlords (General Klang, Singh-Singh) to pick up the slack - and even with them, Poppy Joe's status as "half-breed" plays a role. While the warlord Singh-Singh is not *biologically* mixed race, he is *culturally so*. He is Chinese, but has spent some time in New York, and desires nothing more than to be "like" a white American. Thus, in one episode, he attempts to force April Kane (a Dale-like character introduced as Terry's first real love-interest) to marry him… so that she can teach him English. Explains Mr. Blaze, another Ol'Pop, Singh-Singh had been a professional wrestler in New York, and he thought the city was an earthly paradise. But, "'his managers wanted t'foster the Eurasian Legend… [and] wouldn't allow him to go anywhere." Now, a wealthy gunrunning thug, Singh-Singh longs to return to the Big Apple, this time *almost* a white man, speaking English.[22]

Pat Ryan is only one of Terry's many adult mentors, but Terry never wants for a

two fisted pal (until 1941). Terry ages, but he's obviously always there to play the title role. Connie remains… Connie. Dale disappears, but her place is taken by a long stream of Anglo-Saxon (usually blonde) women who seem to crowd into China from Wisconsin or Denmark on a regular basis.

Women, in fact, come in two sorts in *Terry*. The first of the pure of heart and the pure of deed - Dale herself, the aforementioned April Kane (a teen-aged Southern Belle) - who appear in China for no good reason and (usually) play the role of Terry's love interest. The second are the pure of heart, but a wee bit shady in deed, and who are always attracted to Pat Ryan - Rouge ("You'd hardly think she was a criminal - until you got slugged."); Raven, a "raven"-haired temptress of questionable mores who dies a martyr's death in the service of God, Country, and Pat; Normandy Drake, Pat Ryan's one true love but married to another man; and, of course, Burma, who (despite her name) is a Nordic cover-girl from someplace in "the States." How she came to China is never made clear, but we know the Law would love to get its hooks in her. "Wonder if I'll ever be happy," she asks herself, plaintively, in a 1938 strip, "Never probably. Terry didn't think of the real reason I have to stay here [in China]… The cops would catch me sure if I ever went back to civilization."[23]

But the ultimate shady lady of Terry is, of course, The Dragon Lady. Introduced shortly after Terry and Ryan themselves, the Dragon Lady (her real name is always subject to question) appeared in the strip first in the form of its colour incarnation.[24] While Terry and friends dealt with Poppy Joe on week days, they told a separate story on Sundays - one in which Terry and Pat are captured by a pirate band commanded by, of course, the Dragon Lady. At first she considers killing them. Then she decides she rather likes the looks of Pat. Then, all three are captured by yet another pirate. They must unite against him, and do so… and upon escaping form a de facto alliance that will operate, on and off, for the rest of the strip.

The Dragon Lady is a curious being. She is, in theory, mixed race, but her appearance is anything but that. Her eyes are almost ridiculously slanted - it seems that the sockets themselves are set at a 45 degree angle, and she looks more Martian than Chinese - but otherwise she is simply un-Asian. Her stature, the shape of her face (angular, with high cheekbones), her body type, all are as Nordic as any Petty-girl, and it is surely no surprise to learn that Caniff's model for her was not Suzy Wong or Mrs. Chang but an American beauty queen.[25] She is, in other words, an American woman given a few Asian features, perhaps in order that she might thus have "permission" to be sexually aggressive.

And a predator, sexual and otherwise, she certainly is. She kills, raids, wages war, and murders without a trace of regret … but she becomes infatuated with Pat Ryan, and is even tender at times toward the adolescent Terry. She is, thus, of course, that most Freudian of all stock characters, the Bad Mother, the Virgin-Whore, and the More Experienced Older Woman who initiates the adolescent male.

But if the Dragon Lady is thus well-defined, the China she inhabits is vague. We see it, but as a backdrop. The main characters pursue their adventures against a soft-focus China of teaming masses (most of them faceless), cities crowded with coolies and rickshaws, villages of Pearl S. Buck-style peasants (Caniff, who never went

near Asia, said later that his sole original sources for the strip were a few Buck novels), and a countryside ruled by vicious warlords (there seems to be no central government). Combat is everywhere in this China. Great wars are underway, though, frankly, it isn't quite clear who the participants are, nor what they fight over. Indeed, that is one of the chief characteristics of this realm - violence is no longer the monopoly of the State. Anyone can turn to it, and frequently does so, with perfect justification. It is, in the hands of the hero, enormously cleansing.

Then there is treasure… Terry's China is full of it. Each adventure has as its goal enormous material wealth, or something like it. There's Terry's Gold Mine, sought on and off for several strips. Then, there's the Dragon Lady's hoard, which she must defend from the clutches of even worse pirates, and which forces her to join forces with Terry and Pat. Then there's Normandy Drake, daughter of the immensely powerful tycoon Chauncey Drake - who Pat and Terry must defend from villain Dmitri Phoneeski and his henchmen (they plan to kill the Drakes to create a stock market crash to their own benefit).

In short, Terry's China is only very remotely like the real one in the 1930s. There are certain similarities - both had areas governed by warlords, both were peopled by individuals who called themselves "Chinese," both knew hardship and conflict. But beyond that… there is nothing. The two are different places. One is a country. The other is a place in the imagination, a separate world in which "adventure is still possible"; a land where men are real guys, and women are sexually active; a place where pirates thoughtlessly but helpfully leave their buried treasure under every rock; and where adolescent boys - like Terry - can (under the watchful eye of Scoutmaster Ryan) have boyish adventures, and in the process, become men.

In other words, this "China" is not on any map.

It is, instead, Fairyland.

V.

One could, of course, discount Terry and Company as being merely one eccentric vision from one artist and his publisher. But that is impossible, for Terry is not unique. A glance at the major adventure strips of the 1930s reveals the same theme, more or less overt, repeated time and time again.

Consider Buck Rogers. We've already noticed how he leaves New Chicago for outer space, but the worlds to which he travels take on a curiously China-like quality, particularly as they are menaced by the new villains of the strip, the Tigermen of Mars, who in turn go from dangerous but anthropomorphic cat-creatures in 1930, to very thinly disguised Japanese nine years later - as in "*Martian War Threat*" (1938-39) and "*Martians Invade Jupiter*" (1942). These "tigermen," some of whom have floppy ears like a dog's, bomb and strafe helpless civilians from their Zero-like spaceships and natter on about a "New Order" that sounds sometimes Hitlerian, but more often like the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.[26]

And Buck wasn't alone. Wherever papers were sold and comic strips consumed, the orbital Mr. Rogers had neighbors and imitators. Chief among these, surely, was Flash Gordon, who appeared in 1934 as the protégé of the brilliant draftsman Alex

Raymond. Unlike his older cousin Buck, Flash restricted his extraterrestrial jaunts mostly to the planet Mongo, but it too was a thinly disguised China (Mongo-lia) on which innocent women, children, and hawkmen wage a struggle against oppression, exotic warlords, and totalitarianism, the latter in the form of the Emperor Ming the Merciless.[27]

Meanwhile, Roy Crane's *Captain Easy* made frequent forays to the mysterious Orient, as did Zack Mosley's *Smilin' Jack*. Even Prince Valiant got into the Asia act. The quintessential European Knight of the Middle Ages found himself, in the 1930s, turning East and increasingly at odds with Eurasian nomads - Huns and their kin, "The Easterlings."[28]

Why China? Actually, the answer is "Why not China?" It was distant, exotic, and more, in the news. People, even the readers of comics pages, knew about it. Editorial writers decried Japanese aggression, missionaries and missionary societies made certain it was mentioned in sermons, radios carried news reports of warlords and battles. It was, in short, a place known well enough to be recognized, yet little enough to be a blank screen upon which people could project their own fantasies.[29]

There's another question, of course, and that's harder: Why Terry?

In retrospect, Caniff was clearly an important artist -more than deserving of his Reubens - that is, the Oscar of the cartooning, which is given once a year by the National Cartoonist Society. Caniff got it twice, in 1946 and again 1971.[30] Still, the sophisticated reader, turning to Terry and company, might well be excused for wondering what all the fuss was about. Undoubtedly Caniff was good... but, he wasn't *that* good. Crane, not Caniff, had already not only invented the action strip but (as Caniff himself freely admitted) introduced the delicate, almost Japanese pen-work for which Caniff would later be credited. As for Caniff's use of light and shadow, that too wasn't new. Long before, George McManus, in his *Bringing Up Father* (1918) - the story of a reluctant millionaire (Jiggs), his social climbing wife (Maggie), and Norah, their impossibly beautiful daughter - had done things with shadow and silhouette that frankly put Terry to shame. Indeed, the sophisticated reader might well ask, where is the wonder and charm, and genuine vision, of Winsor McCay, that man who, with his magnificent *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905), provided a true and potent rival to Dali and European surrealism? Where, for that matter, is the manic and subversive anarchy of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913), in which Krazy and Ignatz the brick-throwing mouse bring lunatic codependency to new levels of dysfunction in a barren landscape that bears an eerie resemblance to Trinity Crater?

And we have not even begun to address the issues of plot, character, or dialog - none of which happens gracefully with Terry. Consider, for example, the exchange between Pat and the Dragon Lady in a 1939 strip in which the Lady begins the encounter by threatening Pat with a gun.[31] "Ease off the artillery, beautiful," he responds casually, lighting his pipe. "If you shot me you'd be fresh out of someone to be angry with."

"Get out!" she yells.

"I think being so high-minded and patriotic cramps your technique! When you were

a freelance hoodlum your style of evil was much more spectacular," he continues.

"I wish to be alone," she tells him, moodily, stealing a line from Garbo.

Pat ignores her. "That's another thing! You've been kidding yourself that you're a sort of female Napoleon!… You have all the tricks. But women are always failures at such tactics! They can only go so far. Then sentiment catches up with them - and they throw a tire!"

It goes on like that for quite a long time. And one assumes, surely, that it is unnecessary to add that the scene ends with the Dragon Lady once again threatening Pat with a gun, and that he then sweeps her into his arms, kisses her passionately, and she drops her weapon in an attack of brain-numbed ecstasy.

But, of course, while the sophisticated reader might be perfectly justified in saying all these unkind things about the "the Rembrandt of the Comic Strip", he or she will still be irrelevant. Caniff did not draw for the sophisticated reader. Terry could care less what that reader believed or thought. They were concerned with the American masses who read them, loyally, day after day, in paper after paper, from one end of the country to the other, in the midst of the Depression when even the few cents required for a copy of the *Tribune* might be a significant outlay.

And for them, Terry had clearly touched something… and something powerful.

vi.

Let us, then, turn to Caniff's audience. What was it they wanted from him?

Well, their own lives were complex. These were, mostly, working- to middle-class boys and adolescents. Already, even before the Great War of 1914, the relationship of such people and their world - and particularly their rulers - was complex. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, young men of "a certain class" had been regarded by the elites as dangerous creatures to be tamed; and the literature produced for them in the Victorian period reflects that. Of course there were exceptions - "penny dreadfuls" and dime novels - but most prewar "boys' literature," positively crawls with self-righteous moral instruction. Thus, *The Boy's King Arthur*, "edited for boys by Sidney Lanier" in 1880, takes the Arthur-mythos, strips it of its Celtic necromancy, Norman-French eroticism, and English brutality, and turns it instead into a 321-page sermon on polite behavior.[32] The Stratemeyer Syndicate, a book production company with hordes of ghost writers and house pen-names, would produce the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, the Rover Boys, and, of course, Tom Swift, boy-inventor, whose career was to show time and time again that with work, study, courage, and, of course, proper deference paid to the Powers That Be, anyone could be the next Edison.

But, even Tom Swift paled compared to the heroes of Horatio Alger, Jr., whose "boys" are an endless succession of success stories - success, that is, earned by faithful adherence to the values of the greater society. The titles alone tell the story: *Frank Fowler, the Cash Boy*; *Andy Grant's Pluck*; *Luke Walton: or, the Chicago News Boy*; and *The Erie Train Boy*. And, Alger wasn't alone. A whole school of writers produced kindred texts - consider, for example, G.A. Henry[33], who

offered us at the turn of the century such ripping yarns as *Facing Death: or the Hero of the Vaughan Pits, A Tale of Coal Mines* ("The tale is well written and illustrated and there is much reality in the characters. If any father, clergyman, or schoolmaster is on the lookout for a good book to give as a present to a boy who is worth his salt, this the book we would recommend - *Standard*"). Or, then too, there's Henry's page-turner, *Sturdy and Strong; or how George Andres Made His Way* ("The history of a hero of everyday life, whose love of truth, clothing of modesty, and innate pluck, carry him naturally from poverty to affluence. George Andrews is an example of a character with nothing to cavil at and stands as a good instance of chivalry in domestic life. - *The Empire*.")

There is, of course, only so much that anyone, even "boys of pluck", could stand of this sort of literature, and much can be learned about who actually bought it by the line in the review of *Facing Death*, to wit "father, clergyman, or schoolmaster." In other words, the "boys" were surely not selecting the material themselves. They were having it presented to them.

But, as early as the 1900s, this system was starting to change. T.J. Jackson Lears in his *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, has shown rather definitively that America was suffering from a crisis of moral authority even before the turn of the century.[34] The American elite, with its optimism, positivism, rationalism, and faith in industrial development, no longer seemed entirely steady in the saddle of the culture. Socialism, urbanization, class conflict, mass immigration: these had all combined to make the Anglo-Saxon elite's "mandate of heaven" not quite so certain.

Then came the new century, the Great War, economic unrest even before the Stock Market Crash (the prosperity of the 1920s was not universal) and Prohibition, that enormous failed experiment in forced morality which demonstrated as nothing else that the Law was beneath contempt. The point being that by 1930, young American males were no longer quite so eager to be preached at. At least not about their own failings, and certainly not by an Elite that itself seemed corrupt, inefficient, impotent, and self-serving.

vii.

This crisis of Elite authority was combined, moreover, by a technical revolution. Printing had before been an art. Now, it was an industry. New, faster, machine driven presses, capable of printing colour, combined with cheap paper ("pulp") meant that after the Civil War, printed documents could become increasingly a commodity. Increasingly, too, the "father, clergyman, or schoolmaster " was irrelevant. Young men were able to buy their own entertainment, even if that just meant the comic section of a newspaper.

And, being young males, what they wanted was sex, violence, and adventure. But not just any sex, violence, and adventure. Again, consider the psychology of the 1930s. The Depression, mass unemployment, and an uncertain world situation had cut the ground away under the feet of most everyone. In the past, young males might have dealt with the resulting feelings of helplessness and isolation by turning to the corporatist bodies which had traditionally provided an emotional and material safety-net for the masses - churches, paternalistic employers, the extended family

of the farm. But, by 1930, those corporatist bodies are less powerful, and worse, after war and urbanization, they are not particularly trusted any longer. Most young males, then, know that they are on their own. They will rise or (more probably) fall alone, and unlike Alger's boys, for them there are no guarantees that pluck or deference to authority will be rewarded.

And their fantasies reflect all that. They turn away from "corporatist" heroes - boys who succeed via allegiance to the values of the greater society - to individualist ones, who succeed *in spite of* the values of the larger society. Frank Fowler, the Cash Boy, yields to the Soldier of Fortune, a man of no fixed loyalties other than to his friends and his own ideals, who has every intention of being rich but none of being a businessman, and who is ready, even eager, to employ violence to achieve his aims. He has little respect for the school teachers, Mrs. Grundys, and plutocrats of his culture, and if anything, seeks to heal society by their removal.

And how does one become such a hero? A warrior-saint with ready fists and six gun?

One, of course, goes to Fairyland.

viii.

It is no longer fashionable to quote Joseph Campbell. His magisterial dictates about all myths and all stories seem, today, faintly absurd. Still, he has his uses. And one must confess that even the quickest glance at world literature shows that he did successfully codify at least some of the major tropes that govern our fiction and myth. Of these, most important to the study of popular literature in the 1930s, is his interpretation of the hero - what he calls "the monomyth." In it, he notes, "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*; which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth . . . *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*" [ital. his].[35]

Now, let us examine the plot of *Terry & Pirates*. A normal man, actually a boy, "Terry Lee," who is a complete isolate, an orphan, receives a "call to adventure" in the form of a mysterious stranger (Pat Ryan). A treasure waits in an exotic country, far, far away. They go in search of it. They encounter great evils and great goods. They meet as well the Dragon Lady - sometimes temptress, sometimes enemy, sometimes gentle mother/bride. They come at last to the treasure… but it is not a treasure of gold and silver. It is rather Terry's adulthood. And he comes forth a man, united with a new family to take the place of his vanished parents - the Army Air Corps, in which he serves. And he "returns" to the world of common-day, in the sense that he becomes again an American… no longer an adventurer in a foreign land, but rather a knight in the service of his country.

And what boons does he bestow on his fellow man? Unity, leadership, and compassion. Thus, in what is probably the most famous of Terry strips, in 1943, Colonel Corkin - the last of Terry's adult mentors, he will need no more - tells the

newly promoted Terry (now in the Army Air Corps as a fighter pilot) to always remember his spiritual ancestors ("A ghostly echelon of good guys who flew their hearts out in old kites to give you the know-how"), to care for his men and treat them with respect ("Every grease monkey in that gang is right beside you in the cockpit") and to always hold dear his comrades and countrymen ("Remember, there are a lot of good guys missing from mess tables in the South Pacific, Alaska, Africa, Britain, Asia and back home who are sorta counting on you to take it from here.")

Terry has thus become, himself, the leader of men, with an organic link to their well-being, which the old Elites failed to provide.

ix.

It was Puff the Magic Dragon who made it most clear that childhood, even one in the Depression, has its end. So too would Terry's long-term involvement with China change over time. Gradually, Caniff would introduce a new player into the strip - Japan. At first calling the Japanese simply "the Invaders", Caniff increasingly put Terry and company at odds with an army of occupation from the North. (Much to the fury of Patterson, who called on his cartoonist to stop warmongering. Unfortunately Patterson picked the wrong time to bring up the issue - November of 1941.[36])

It would, ultimately, spell the end of the strip. Indeed, the whole magical-adventure genre was on the way out - though no one knew it yet. Slowly but surely, the free spirits and soldiers of fortunes of the comic world would be curtailed by the real one. Most joined various branches of the armed services - just as Terry had become an Army pilot. No longer were they free agents. They were men of authority under authority, engaged in a great crusade.

Caniff was 4F, but he spent the war years as a kind of unofficial morale officer for men in uniform. Terry came to embody the best that an American military man could be. Then, too, Caniff created a new strip, *Male Call*, whose sole recurring character would be "Miss Lace," an animate pinup meant to make American soldiers feel a little less alone.

With the end of the war, Caniff abandoned Terry - mostly for economic reasons. He didn't own the strip; it was the property of his syndicate. He therefore left his Pirates (it continued on under different artists until 1973) and began a second adventure strip, *Steve Canyon*, whose rights he controlled absolutely. At first a throwback to the soldier of fortune genre, "Colonel" Canyon soon became a military-industrial corporation man, rejoining the Air Force with the outbreak of the Korean war and staying there through the bitter years of Vietnam. The strip would end only with Caniff's death in 1988.

Long before that, however, the comic strip (and particularly the adventure strip) fell on hard times. It faced increased competition for the attention of young males from a whole host of new electronic sources of entertainment - particularly TV. Worse, after World War II, comics ceased to seem quite so important to newspaper publishers. Their revenue streams were moving from readership to advertising, and advertisers are not necessarily motivated by serial features. The result was that comics were less valued, and have shrunk in size and number over the passing

years. Postwar comics, then, even when they were hugely successful, had to address different issues. They returned, for example, to humour and political commentary. Thus, of the great successes of the recent past - *Peanuts*, *Pogo*, *The Born Loser*, *Eek and Meek*, *BC*, *Zippy*, *Doonesbury*, *Bloom County*, *Cathy*, *Dilbert* - none were adventure strips. The artists who might have done adventure strips fled to a new world - the comic book, which was larger, more novel-like, and offered greater space for artistic experimentation.

Meanwhile, Terry's image of China as Fairyland had ended its useful life long before comics themselves fell into their current dire straits. The generation of young men who knew just enough about China to be aware of it, but not so much that they intuitively understood its reality, had grown up. They were no longer in need of fantasies in which they rejected authority or developed their own adulthood. They were grown. Their fantasies of heroism now functioned within the supports of adult institutions - their employers, their corporatist associations, their own families, and the military.[37] Thus Terry became Steve Canyon, ultimately married, and spent much of the 1960s and '70s trying to understand the younger generation.

That younger generation, in turn, could not take China as its wish-fulfilling fantasyland for the very good reason that it was no longer on the map - that is, the mental map of the average American. A Communist power after '49, China and its shadow on Taiwan were no longer acceptable as the stuff of legend. Besides, there were new wonderlands to explore - outer space (now seemingly closer than ever), the urban frontier of the city, the pure fantasy worlds of Tolkien…

X.

So, how do we interpret Terry… and Buck, and Captain Easy, and Flash, as they went to exotic worlds and opposed authority? Clearly, they weren't particularly enlightened by a modern measure. Their conceptions of men of colour, and women of any shade, weren't progressive. And their Fairyland - their imagined "China" - was a form of Orientalism, using that term to evoke Edward Said, particularly in that the "real" China vanishes entirely from its view, its place taken by a completely Western construct.[38]

But was Terry evil?

Consider: if Terry's social-narrative is naive, and if it contains much that we today find distasteful, then it is yet remarkably benign compared to much that was being said by the "thoughtful," "serious", and "educated" elites of the time. Terry never called for an accommodation with the Axis powers, which many in haute culture did. Caniff always understood the inevitability of war in the Pacific, and that the Japan of the period was both dangerous and aggressive, something that many wiser heads (like Patterson's) did not. If the Dragon Lady was not a feminist icon, at least she was an admission that women could be more than traditional helpmates…that they, also, could be pirates, wild and free.

Thus, if Terry, and Easy, and Buck, and Flash were not deathless art, nor entirely in tune with our own conceptions of social morality, it is hard to believe that they did their readers, or their world, any harm.

And, indeed, they may have done quite a bit of good.

In one of Hemingway's short stories, "*The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio*," the main character is a sick man in a hospital. He debates with some companions the "opiate of the people," which the man's Marxist acquaintances have expanded to include not only the Church but also consumer society ("The Radio") which distracts the worker from revolution by means of mindless entertainment. After a time, the man's friends leave. He considers his own recent experience… and then concludes, yes, the Nun and Radio, the gambling den - these are opiates.

But life, particularly life lived in (to quote the famous curse) "interesting times," of war and revolution and Depression, is a painful business. Why not, then, give the patient opiates? At least during the worst of it, when the gangrened leg must be removed or the breech-birth child brought screaming into the world?

And so, consider those who read Terry… and Buck, and Flash, and Tarzan. They were children, yet children in an age of social dislocation, economic distress, fear, very real want, and no little threat of violence - very soon these people would leave their childhood behind for battlefields in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific.

Thus, they had much to endure. Their maturity was gained only through enormous personal adversity.

So, was Terry unreal? Did he portray a fantasy China? Could he be accused of much which, today, we would could consider racist, and sexist, and simply stupid? Of course. He is guilty as charged.

But if he - and Buck, and Flash, and Tarzan - also helped dull the pain for their readers, as those children were forced too soon into their tragic and chill adulthood…

Then who are we, or anyone, to deny them their greatness?

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all Buck Rogers primary material referenced in this paper is contained in the *The Collected Works of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, Robert C. Dille, ed. (New York. Bonanza Books. 1969.)

[2] In the early, as opposed to later, Buck Rogers mythos, the Mongols are "artists of the flesh." The Emperor is thus both the chief executive and also the Surgeon General of his nation.

[3] Also unclear from the text is whether "Red" refers to politics or a slight skin rash.

[4] Dille 2.

5 Dille 2.

6 Dille 2.

7 Dille 23.

8 Generally credited, but not universally.

9 Dille 140.

10 For an excellent overview of Buck and his place in the evolution of the comic strip, see also Ron Goulart's *The Adventurous Decade* (New Rochelle. Arlington House. 1975).

11 Jared Diamond. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. (New York. Norton. 1999) 236.

12 For details of Roy Crane, Tubbs, and Captain Easy, see Don Markstein's *Toonopedia*., www.toonopedia.com/easy.html

13 For an interesting commentary on Tubbs' (ultimately failed) transition to a comic strip hero, see Robert C. Harvey's *Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson. University of Mississippi Press. 1994) 79.

14 Information on Segar and his career is available from several very readable sources. See, in particular, Harvey ""What This Country Needed Was A Good Segar"" in *Art*, 159, as well as Fred M. Grandinetti *Popeye: An Illustrated History of E.C. Segar's Character In Print, Radio, Television, and Film, 1929-1993* (Jefferson. McFarland & Co. 1994).

15 Patterson has been little visited by scholars. For details of Patterson's life, I rely on *American National Biography Online* and Vicki Jane Baker's *Joseph Medill Patterson and the American Comic Strip*, an unpublished Master's thesis submitted to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of George Washington University in 1971.

16 In 1940, this list also came to include Brenda Starr. However, Patterson never cared for the script - not, apparently, because it had a liberated heroine for a main character. In fact, Patterson had introduced the first liberated woman into the comics with Martin Branner's Winnie Winkle. Rather, he seems to have detested the fact that Brenda's hair and clothing remained fashion-magazine perfect, even while she was taking a black jack to the thick skulls of the bad guys.

17 This is Patterson's line according to *Time Magazine* as quoted in *Milton Caniff: Conversations*, Robert C. Harvey, ed. (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press.

2002) viii. However, several variants exist. Harvey reports it as "Anything can still happen out there" (Conversations. ix.) while Jeff Maeder, in ""An Interview with Milton Caniff"," has Caniff himself reporting that Patterson said, "The China coast is the last outpost for this kind of adventure" (*Conversations* 75).

18 *Conversations.* 75.

19 *Art* 144.

20 Caniff initially wished to use the name "Tommy Tucker" - the family name wonderfully nuanced with adventure, romance, and masculine daring. Inexplicably Patterson struck it out and selected "Terry" instead. And thus, "Terry & The Pirates" was born.

21 Unless otherwise indicated, all Terry & The Pirates primary source material is taken from *Great Comics syndicated by the Daily News-Chicago Tribune*. Herb Galewitz, ed. (New York. Crown Publishers. 1972).

22 GoGraphics Terry & The Pirates site at http://gographics.com/funnies/education.htm.

23 *Great Comics*.

24 *Art* 151.

25 *Conversations*. 20.

26 However, the real height of Buck's racism isn't reached until 1943, and the "Monkeymen of Planet X." In this episode, we learn that the Japanese have been exterminated on Earth, but that a few escaped into Space. Here, on Planet X, they "reverted to type" and became villainous monkey-creatures.

27 In his early incarnation, Ming is simply an "oriental despot." Well before 1941, however, he has become a modern dictator, complete with secret police and an extraterrestrial gulag.

28 Europe, too, was not immune to the same phenomenon. The great Belgian cartoonist, Hergé, sent his Tintin (a young reporter with a world-class cowlick) to Shanghai in 1936 in *Le Lotus Bleu*. There, he meets ever so decent (and ever so helpless) Chinese struggling against foreign oppression - chiefly Japanese, but also British. Tintin links up with Chinese freedom fighters, takes a Chinese orphan boy under his wing, and brings down Japanese drug smugglers. Hergé had, in fact, Chinese friends, and in 1939 would be invited to China by none other than Madam Chiang Kai-Shek for his sympathetic portrait of the Chinese.

29 ⬚ At other times, other places have played the same role. Africa, for instance, did so in the 1920s with the Tarzan books. But, by 1933, Africa seemed a relatively peaceful backwater, and so, for want of headlines, was deprived of a place in popular awareness and popular fantasy.

30 ⬚ The National Cartoonist Society. http://www.reuben.org/fiftyplus/caniff.html

31 ⬚ *Great Comics*. 262.

32 ⬚ Sidney Lanier. *The Boy's King Arthur* (New York. Charles Schribner's Sons. 1926).

33 ⬚ The titles and quotes which follow are taken from an advertisement for boy's literature in the back pages of Horatio Alger Jr. *The Erie Train Boy* (Akron. The Superior Printing Company. Undated but presumably 1910.)

34 ⬚ T.J. Jackson Lears. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*. (New York. Pantheon. 1981)

35 ⬚ Joseph Campbell. *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. (1956. New York. Meridian. 1971) 30.

36 ⬚ *Conversations*. 255.

37 ⬚ Some of these, note, were quite new. The families they built were now nuclear families, not the extended family networks of the pre-war years. The military and its associated veterans' groups were more radical. Perhaps not since the Civil War had military service been so much a part of the shared experience of nearly all American men.

38 ⬚ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. (New York. Vintage Books Edition. 1979)