Look! Up in the Sky! It's What's-His-Name!

Frederick M. Burelbach
LOOK! UP IN THE SKY! IT'S WHAT'S-HIS-NAME!

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There is a world known to many young people—and to some of us older folks—where the skies of the major cities are filled with gaudily garbed figures flying, swinging, or bounding on their ways to some new adventure. This is the world divided into two mighty monarchies—Marvel and D. C. Comics—and some smaller fiefdoms (Charleton, Golden Key, etc.), the world of comic books. Ever since D. C. brought out Superman in 1938, super heroes have been popular, and when Marvel Comics introduced the Fantastic Four in 1961, followed by the Avengers, the X-Men, and the most popular hero of all, Spider-Man, the pantheon started to expand to its present count of over two hundred mighty men, women, and...well...things. Most of these characters have secret identities (you remember the mild-mannered Clark Kent, Superman's secret identity, don't you?), and coming up with appropriate names not only for the super heroes but for their alter egos as well has taxed the invention of many a writer and editor.
The attached lists (Appendices A and B), containing a substantial but by no means exhaustive collection of super heroes, indicate something of the scope of the problem faced by these writers. The lists also reveal some other interesting phenomena about the names of super heroes and their implications. But first, a disclaimer: some of the names are difficult to categorize. For instance, should Lightning Lad belong in the "Light and Dark" category or in that entitled "The Elements"? Is Batman more closely allied to "Birds" or to Animals"? Some of my choices may be dubious, but I am seeking trends, not statistical accuracy. Another caution: I shall use the term "hero" regardless of the sex of the character, since "heroine" seems to me to fall into the same sexist class as "authoress" and "poetess."

Since comic books are quite consciously attempting to create a kind of new folklore based on epic traditions, it is appropriate that the largest category of super hero names comes from mythology and allied Classical references. Marvel comics, with its extensive Norse and Greek pantheons, clearly leads in this category, with nineteen names to D. C.'s five and D. C.'s names, with the exception of Isis, are only tangentially mythic. Although Marvel has tried to be reasonably accurate in assigning powers to known gods and demigods, there has necessarily (given the dramatic requirements of the medium) been much imaginative creation as well. Thor wields his hammer, Balder his sword, and Medusa her hair, but the eye-blasts of
Cyclops and the stamping hooves of Gorgon bear little or no resemblance to these characters' originals. On occasion, these characters encounter mythic villains—Loki, Ares, and Pluto, for example—but more frequently they oppose human evildoers on earth or cosmic perils in outer space. Although the basic story told by the comics is that of "good guy" versus "bad guy," similar to that of such other popular literary forms as detective and cowboy stories, the use of mythic names and powers elevates the conflict to one of abstract, universal good against ultimate evil. The action takes place in the realms of the epic and the divine (indeed, D. C. has a book called The New Gods, wherein characters such as Orion and Light-Ray battle the arch-villain Darkseid; master of Apokolips). Although the divine conflict is represented by human-appearing characters, it nevertheless takes on a significance transcending the more limited arenas of other popular fictions. As in The Iliad, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, and Tennyson's "Ulysses" (if the comparison doesn't seem too grandiose), the reader is set among deeds "not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."

The next two groups, about equally large, should perhaps be seen as one; at any rate, many names assigned
to the "Light and Dark" category could equally well go in the "Elements" category. However, I think it important to observe how many names are derived from concepts of light and dark because these names emphasize the extreme good-evil dichotomy which is the basis of comic-book morality. Indeed, many other super heroes, who are more appropriately listed elsewhere, have either names or powers that reveal this same emphasis: for example, Black Widow, Nightcrawler, Vykin the Black, Black Panther, Batman, Black Canary, Black Condor, and Nighthawk. The darkness of evil is countered by dark forces, frequently wielding weapons of light. This same primitive morality is also suggested by the references to elemental forces contained in the names of these two groups. It will be noted that, whereas Marvel Comics emphasizes mythic sources of power, D. C. much more frequently goes directly to the elements themselves, which were so often the origins of the gods. Again, the use of elemental forces in the nomenclature has an elevating effect on the conflict. As in much "space opera" (for example, the stories of E. E. "Doc" Smith), cosmic powers are unleashed, and the conflict between good and evil is imaged on the level of thunder, lightning, tempest, and earthquake. As in King Lear and some primitive vegetation
myths, nature itself seems to be revolted by evil and opposes its forces against the evildoer.

These powers are also thought to be wielded by witches and warlocks, and approximately the same size group of super heroes have names associated with the occult, although not all of them possess occult powers. Angel and Banshee, for instance, are mutants who, respectively, have wings and an extraordinary vocal power, and Deathlok is a cyborg, part man and part machine. The other characters have psychic or occult powers, however; they are an indication of the continuing popularity of ghost and horror stories. In fact, there is a sizable number of other comics based on Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, werewolves, ghouls, and other beasts. The same fascination with the mysteries of good and evil that fills religions with angels and devils, inspires witchcraft, and gave us Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist manifests itself in a simplified form in the chanted spells of a Dr. Strange or the soul-fire blasts of Son of Satan. It is curious, too, that several of these hecromancers have "Doctor" attached to their names; the activities of physicians and other scientists must appear decidedly magical to the childlike mind. In fact, as Ernest Dichter points out in
The Strategy of Desire, the power of knowledge and its abuses can lead to monstrous evil, which needs to be attacked by the proper use of equal or greater knowledge.  

Even larger in total count, although I have subdivided them into three smaller categories, is the number of names from animal life. In this connection, several curious things can be observed. It may not be surprising to find no names taken from domestic animals (after all, who ever heard of Power Pig or Super Chicken, and Howard the Duck is a satiric take-off on the super hero pattern, while Mighty Mouse is also played mostly for laughs.) Nor perhaps is it surprising to find names like Hawkman and Falcon for these heroes who swoop down on the rodents of the crime world. But a robin is not considered fierce and predatory (except perhaps by worms!). And although Batman deliberately chooses his name because of its frightening implications, as he says in his origin story— he may be thinking of vampire bats and haunted houses—bats prey only on little insects and are best noted for getting in one's hair. Of course, the writers' intention may have been to suggest that criminals are worms and insects, but if so the stature of the combatants is significantly reduced. Turning to the other animals, one
notes the preponderance of felines—probably because of
the lithe ferocity of such creatures—although, inter-
estingly, one of Batman's arch-antagonists is Catwoman.
Somewhat surprising are the anonymous Beast (who, how-
ever, is pictured as a wolf-like creature), for who
would want to be associated with such a name, and Cha-
meleon Boy, who is the lone super hero with a reptilian
name, although many villains, understandably, are rep-
tiles: Copperhead, Kobra, Rattler, Lizard, and Con-
strictor, for example. Even more surprising is the
number of heroes with names of insects and related crea-
tures. One would not think that spider, ants, and bees
would be considered particularly heroic. However, if
one considers that the primary audience for comics is
adolescent and pre-adolescent boys, who have a penchant
for teasing girls with insects and who may fantasize
themselves as the little creature with the painful bite,
then names and powers of such heroes may seem more ap-
propriate. This latter consideration—that comics
readers are in fact small when compared with adults—
may also explain the absence of large beast like bulls,
elephants, rhinoceroses, etc. among the heroes (although
there are villains with such identities.), and why the
villains are so often larger than the heroes. The super
hero is the fantasy image of the boy, the villain that of the parent, who is seen as repressive and threatening. In this way, comics are akin to fables, and it is likely that there is a connection between Marvel Comics' emphasis on mythic heroes and its dominance of the "Insects" category; Marvel Comics is more consciously "literary" than D. C. Comics.

The next largest category is of probably least interest from the onomastics point of view. Here we find the men and women who are fantastic, marvelous, wonderful, super, or just plain ultra. Such general epithets tell us nothing about the characters except that they are above or beyond the norm, subjects for awed admiration. Superman, the earliest superhero, has spawned several imitations; Supergirl is a cousin of his who also escaped the explosion of their home world Krypton, and Superboy is Superman as a youth. Wonder Girl is also the youthful Wonder Woman, and Ms. Marvel and Marvel Girl derive their names directly from the name of Marvel Comics (as does the new Capt. Marvel, who has taken over the name of the earlier Fawcett Publications Capt. Marvel, now called Sha'Zam and sponsored by D. C. as a result of a copyright lawsuit settlement.).
More interesting are the names taken from metals. Superman is known as the man of Steel, but both rhythm and the possible pun on "steal" have kept that metal out of the names of other super heroes. Here is how Stan Lee, the Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, explains how he chose the name Iron Man for a rich inventor-industrialist who wears armor to protect a weak heart:

Needless to say, the title of a strip is tremendously important. It must be a name that has an appealing lilt to it, implies action and adventure, and sounds dramatic. Sometimes it can take longer to dream up a title than it takes to write and draw the entire story. . . . what were we to call our newest character? The Adventures of Rich Man? Hardly. Super-Financier? Not quite. The Mighty Industrialist? It seemed to lack something. The Mysterious Metal Heart? Yechh! But wait a minute. If he's going to wear a type of metal armor, that could be it. The word "metal" was a step in the right direction. How about Metal Man? Not bad, but somehow it didn't seem strong enough. Some metals are weak--some can bend and break. I felt it would be better to get a specific metal. Perhaps steel would do the trick. But
it didn't quite work in combination with other words, as in Steel Man—the rhythm was wrong. So, I kept thinking and running down a list of metals until I came to—iron. The minute I said it, I knew we had our name. Iron Man! The sound was perfect. It suggested might, and raw power. It was easy to say and it sounded dramatic. I couldn't wait to rush to the typewriter. 7

Metals noted for their strength and sheen are naturally preferred, as opposed to the softer, duller metals like copper, zinc, lead, and aluminum, although an interesting group of robot heroes known as the Metal Men includes Lead, Gold, and Tin, named after the metals they are made of. But Tin is frequently a coward, Gold is egotistic, and Lead is dull-witted. If it weren't for Mercury's quick wits and Iron's sturdy character, these heroes would be unable to team up for their exploits.

Equally inanimate are the names of characters in the "Things" category, and whereas readers might want to associate themselves with the strength, and maybe even the insensitivity, of metals, it is hard to understand how they can identify themselves with somebody known as Doll Man or Thing. Except for the miniscule Doll Man, Plastic Man (who is treated as purely cartoon), and Braniac-5 (who has an awe-inspiring computer-like mind under his green skin), the other characters in this group are grotesque monsters, all with naive, child-like minds. Their innocence and essential
kindness under their gruff manner and appearance make them non-threatening, while their sheer power and insensitivity to pain provide the stuff of fantasy for the small and weak. Particularly significant is Hulk, whose alter ego is Dr. Robert Bruce Banner, brilliant nuclear physicist. As a result of exposure to gamma radiation, Banner becomes the brute-like Hulk whenever his adrenaline begins to flow strongly. He has no control over this transition and frequently tries, unavailingly, to fight it off. Hulk wants to be let alone, but his naive power is so great and misdirected that military forces constantly seek to restrain him, leading to many clashes. The fantasy potential for the pre-teen, frustrated by parental demands, is evident.

Finally, the smaller groups, mostly made up of D. C. characters who were originated in the 1940's, take advantage of patriotic themes and names of weapons in their titles. The appropriateness of names like Capt. America and Star Spangled Kid (who formerly had a sidekick named Stripesy) during World War II and the cold war is obvious. Such names fell out of favor during the 1960's (Capt. America even had an identity crisis during the Watergate period and changed his name to Nomad for a period of time), but they have returned on the wings of our current nostalgia craze, complete with resurrected Nazis as opponents. The first Capt. Marvel, now known as Shazam, started a rash of Captains in comics—
comics writers are nothing if not imitative—although there are also some villains who are Captains: Capt. Boomerang and Capt. Cold, for example. I can only guess that the use of captain as a title in all the services is what kept the writers from using other titles, such as Colonel, General, or Admiral; possibly, too, the title implied some distinction but kept the characters from the upper ranks associated with greater age and authority, that is, parent-surrogates. Most peculiar is the infrequency of names associated with weapons, especially modern weapons, despite the fact that many super heroes use extremely advanced technology. Regardless of the power-blasts, jet-boots, web-shooters, and utility belts possessed by various heroes, almost none uses a pistol or similar weapon or employs deadly force. Ultimately, they all depend on the most primitive weapon of all, the fist. This is in accordance with a code of fairness and restrained power—no more violence than is necessary, according to the Comic Book Code—but also concurs with the school-boy morality found in comic books.

It also suggests a distrust of science and technology: many of the super heroes gain their powers because of science gone awry—cosmic rays slashing through an unshielded space ship (The Fantastic Four), gamma radiation (Hulk), an accidental spill of chemicals (Flash), the bite of a radioactive spider (Spider-Man), a fall into a chemical vat (Plastic Man), for example. The power comes
from chaos and is used to prevent further chaos, especially against villains wielding the latest in weapons developed by futuristic technology. Primitive morality is enforced by primitive means, despite the veneer of science.

In general, the names of super heroes have some relationship to their particular powers, origins, or characters, and correlate with their costumes and, on occasion, appearance. The names suggest the primitive, naive, good vs. evil morality inculcated by the comics, despite various attempts at relevancy to current social issues such as racial discrimination and the women's movement. In this fantasy world, where good always triumphs and scorned weaklings really possess super powers, names are chosen for their capacity to attract admiration and positive associations.

Names of the super heroes' alter egos are also chosen for their positive associations, and here it is important to observe the extraordinary uniformity of such names (see Appendix B). With very few exceptions, which themselves are significant, these names are of pronounced Anglo-Saxon origin or naturalization and are short. In general, if the first name contains two syllables, the accent is on the first syllable and the second name is either a monosyllable or an echoing disyllable. If the first name is monosyllable the second name is also a monosyllable or a disyllable with accent on the first syllable. The rhythm is either trochaic
or spondaic, the strongest two meters. Alliteration is often used to accentuate the rhythm. There are no French, Italian, Spanish, Oriental, or Eastern European names. Even the Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics changed his name from Stanley Martin Lieber to Stan Lee. Exceptions to the Anglo-Saxon dominance are names of extraterrestrial aliens, although even these tend to be rhythmically and phonetically similar to the pattern described above (e.g., Gim Allon, Irma Ardéen, Garth Ranzz, Jan Arrah, Thom Kallor, Tenzil Kem, J'onn J'onnz, and Katar Hol and Shayera Hol, who adopted terrestrial names of Carter Hall and Shiera Hall respectively). Another exception, Natasha Romanoff, is similarly significant, because she was formerly a villain, a Communist spy, who defected to the United States to become Black Widow. The recent fad for kung-fu gave rise to an occasional Oriental hero, and Black Panther is the African chief T'Challa, but even here Iron Fist is an American and T'Challa went under a Yankee name for a while. Although the same kind of rhythmic patterns and Anglo-Saxon dominance are found among the super hero names as among their alter egos, the requirements of finding a name to satisfy some of the other demands I have mentioned (myth, imagery, etc.) widen the linguistic range.

Of course, it is appropriate in American publications to have American names, but we all know that there are millions of Americans, including most of the comics writers and artists, with non-
Anglo-Saxon names. Such names, however, have for a long time provided fantasy images for American adolescents, and not only in comic books. Tom Swift, Frank and Andy Hardy, and Nancy Drew have performed exciting adventures in juvenile fiction for many years, and Cap Kennedy and John Carter are familiar names to science fiction readers. In more adult detective fiction, Mike Hammer, James Bond, Philip Marlowe, and even Nick Charles (who, though Greek, has an American-sounding name) focus our fantasies, and even in pornographic novels we encounter names like Linc Tanner and Ben Driver. (Curiously, Freud comments that dreams of flying represent sexual fantasies, as the flying figure signifies the erect penis. ⁹ Although the skin-tight costumes of super heroes invariably fail to reveal genitalia—the Comics Code again—perhaps the flying hero is himself representative of sexual fantasy, especially since the female characters are always extraordinarily voluptuous.) Apparently, to be a "regular" guy or gal, one ought to have an Anglo-Saxon name, preferably one that is either itself a nickname or short and simple names of the alter egos. Comic books create an image of America which is almost frighteningly conservative, shallow, and limited. Such a world may be all right to enter in fantasy—in fact, therein lies much of the escape potential of such literature—but to mistake it for reality would be as dangerous as to leap out of a window under the illusion that you can fly.
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Notes


2 I have, for instance, omitted most of the names of extra-terrestrial aliens, kung-fu experts, and sword-and-sorcery heroes, since these seem even more ephemeral than most super heroes and are named with deliberate exoticism. Super heroes come and go with amazing rapidity; I have tried to select those that have seemed the most durable.


5 It will be seen that I disagree with Arthur A. Berger, who says that super heroes are our "spiritual fathers" (pp. 168-169).

6 Daniels, p. 13.


Categories of Super Hero Names

(Names are designated 'M' if from Marvel Comics or "D.C." if from D.C. Comics.)

I. Myth

Balder (M)
Black Goliath (D.C.)
Colossal Boy (D.C.)
Colossus (M)
Cyclops (M)
Fandral (M)
Goliath (M)
Gorgon (M)
Heimdall (M)
Hercules (M)
Hoglin (M)
Infinity Man (D.C.)
Isis (D.C.)
Medusa (M)
Mimir (M)
Nemesis Kid (D.C.)
Norn Queen (M)
Odin (M)
Sif (M)
Thor (M)
Triton (M)
Valkyrie (M)
Volstagg (M)
Vykin the Black (D.C.)

II. Light and Dark

Black Belt (M)
Black Knight (M)
Dr. Mid-Nite (D.C.)
Dr. Solar (Gold Key)
Fire Lad (D.C.)
Flash (two versions, on Earth-1 and Earth-2; D.C.)
Green Lantern (also two versions; D.C.)
Human Torch (also two versions; Marvel)
Kid Flash (D.C.)
Light Lass (D.C.)

III. Thé Éléments

Aqua Lad (D.C.)
Aquaman (D.C.)
Atom (D.C.)
Chemical King (D.C.)
Chlorophyll Kid (D.C.)
Cosmic Boy (D.C.)
Dynamo Boy (D.C.)
Element Lad (D.C.)
E-Man (Element Man; Charleton)
Hour Man (D.C.)
Ice Man (M)
Johnny Thunder (D.C.)
Matter-Eater Lad (D.C.)
Metamorpho (D.C.)
Moonrider (D.C.)
Power Girl (D.C.)
Power Man (M)
Red Tornado (D.C.)
Saturn Girl (D.C.)
Stone Boy (D.C.)
Storm (M)
Sub-Mariner (M)

IV. Occult

Angel (M)
Banshee (M)
Beautiful Dreamer (D.C.)
Dakimah (M)
Dare Devil (M)
Deadman (D.C.)
Deathlok (M)
Dr. Druid (M)
Dr. Fate
Dr. Strange
Dream Girl
Ghost Rider (M)
Mr. Miracle (D.C.)
II. Light and Dark (con’t.)
Lightning Lad (D.C.)
Nova (M)
Ray (D.C.)
Shade (the Changing Man; D.C.)
Shadow Lass (D.C.)
Star Boy (D.C.)
Vision (M)
Wildfire (D.C.)

V. Birds
Batgirl (D.C.)
Batman (D.C.)
Black Canary (D.C.)
Black Condor (D.C.)
Falcon (M)
Hawkeye (M)
Hawkgirl (D.C.)
Hawkman (D.C.)
Killraven (M)
Nighthawk (M)
Robin (D.C.)
Starhawk (M)

VI. Animals
Beast (M)
Big Bear (D.C.)
Black Panther (M)
Chameleon Boy (D.C.)
Hellcat (D.C.)
Lone Wolf (D.C.)
Moondragon (M)
Wildcat (D.C.)
Wolverine (M)

VII. Insects
Ant Man (also known as Yellow Jacket; M)
Black Widow (M)
Bumble Bee (D.C.)
Mantis (M)
Nightcrawler (M)

IV. Occult
Phantom Girl (D.C.)
Phantom Lady (D.C.)
Princess Projectra (D.C.)
Scarlet Witch (M)
Son of Satan (M)
Spectre (D.C.)

IX. Metals
Ferro Land (D.C.)
Iron Fist (M)
Iron Man (M)
Quick-Silver (M)
Silver Surfer (M)
Metal Men (Tin, Mercury, Gold, Lead, Iron; D.C.)

X. Things
Brainiac-5 (D.C.)
Doll Man (D.C.)
Hulk (M)
Man-Thing (M)
Plastic Man (D.C., originally Quality Comics Group)

XI. Military and Patriotic
Capt. America (M)
Capt. Comet (D.C.)
Capt. Marvel (M)
Capt. Marvel (Shazam; D.C., originally Fawcett)
Capt. Marvel, Jr. (D.C.)
Star Spangled Kid (D.C.)
Uncle Sam (D.C.)

XII. Weapons
Green Arrow (D.C.)
Human Bomb (D.C.)
Swordsman (M)
VII. Insects (con't.)

Spider-Man (M)
Wasp (M)

VIII. General Epithets

Marvel (M)
Mx. Marvel (M)
Mr. Fantastic (M)
Superboy (D.C.)
Supergirl (D.C.)
Superman (D.C.)
Ultra Boy (D.C.)
Ultra Man (D.C.)
Wonder Girl (D.C.)
Wonder Woman (D.C.)
Wonder Man (M)

XIII. Miscellaneous

Adam Strange (D.C.)
Bouncing Boy (D.C.)
Duo Damsel (D.C.)
Duplicate Boy (D.C.)
Elongated Man (D.C.)
Harlequin (D.C.)
Hornblower (D.C.)
Invisible Girl (M)
J'onn J'onns (D.C.)
Karate Kid (D.C.)
Karnak (M)
Manhunter (D.C.)
Mon-El (D.C.)
Shrinking Violet (D.C.)
Speedy (D.C.)

and, of course, Howard The Duck (M)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Alter Egos</th>
<th>Marvel</th>
<th>D.C.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Robert Bruce Banner</td>
<td>Hulk</td>
<td>Barry Allen (Flash, Earth-1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bucky Barnes (Bucky)</td>
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<td>Patsy Walker Baxter (Hellcat)</td>
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<td>Clint Barton (Hawkeye)</td>
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<td>Adam Black (Capt. Comet)</td>
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<td>Dr. Donald Blake (Thor)</td>
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<td>Darrel Dane (Doll Man)</td>
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<td>Johnny Blaze (Ghost Rider)</td>
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<td>Duela Dent (Harlequin)</td>
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<td>Luke Cage (Power Man)</td>
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<td>Ralph Dibney (Elongated Man)</td>
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<td>Carol Danvers (Ms. Marvel)</td>
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<td>Mal Duncan (Hornblower)</td>
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<td>Bill Foster (Black Goliath)</td>
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<td>Pietro Frank (Quick-Silver)</td>
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<td>Jay Garrick (Flash, Earth-2)</td>
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<td>Wanda Frank (Scarlet Witch)</td>
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<td>Barbara Gordon (Batgirl)</td>
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<td>Ben Grimm (Thing)</td>
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<td>Dick Grayson (Robin)</td>
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<td>Rick Jones (Capt. Marvel)</td>
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<td>Carter Hall (Katar Hol; Hawkgirl)</td>
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<td>Henry P. McCoy (Beast)</td>
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<td>Shiera Hall (Shayera Hol; Hawkgirl)</td>
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<td>Hal Jordan (Green Lantern, Earth-1)</td>
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<td>Clark Kent (Superman)</td>
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<td>Peter Parker (Spider-Man)</td>
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<td>Sandra Knight (Phantom Lady)</td>
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<td>Dr. Henry Pym (Ant Man; also Yellow Jacket, Giant Man, and Goliath)</td>
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<td>Roy Lincoln (Human Bomb)</td>
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<td>Janet Van Dyne Pym (Wasp)</td>
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<td>Sue Storm Richards (Invisible Girl)</td>
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<td>Kyle Richmond (Nighthawk)</td>
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<td>Oliver Queen (Green Arrow)</td>
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<td>Steve Rogers (Capt. America)</td>
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