Damsel, Wonder, Object: Gender Expectation and Performance in Superhero Comics

Joseph Willis

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Abstract

With iconic characters like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and Iron Man representing the wider culture's understanding of comics, popular perceptions of the medium are that comics are a male-centric medium focused on male experience and readers. As the medium and the dominant superhero genre has gained attention, focus and research has been placed on the medium and how these narratives deal with representation. With the perception and stereotypes of comic readers and comic narratives as predominantly male, the question of female representation, especially within the dominant superhero genre, is a topic that has garnered attention. In my thesis, I look at the history, sources, and perpetuation of gendered performances within superhero comics. By looking at the field of comics, the perceived dominant reading position, and the constrained meaning of texts, I show that the act of creating, reading, and talking about comics are parts of a logonomic system. This system functions to deliver an expected and constrained representation and meaning about female characters and female experience. In superhero comics, female characters are constrained to performances of the monster or angel. Through the way their powers, costumes, and identities are narratively constructed, female characters are forced to be either submissive and objectified angels who conform to patriarchal power structures, or dangerous and monstrous women who need to be punished and normalized. Superhero comics work to interpolate the perceived dominant reading position, deliver pleasure, assuages fear, and transmits an expected meaning of male/female relationships and performances.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Tracey Potts and Dr. Andrew Goffey for their fantastic guidance, understanding, dedication, and always being there to nudge me down paths of research I would have never found. I would also like to thank them for their patience as I tried to discuss superhero minutiae or just needed to chat about *Deadwood* and *Rupaul's Drag Race*. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Grainge for making the University of Nottingham the most inviting university in the UK.

I would like to thank Page 45 in Nottingham for being the best local comic shop I have ever had. Jonathan and Stephen always had the perfect recommendation and knew what book I came in for before I did. Their store will always be my favorite part of Nottingham.

Many thanks to my dad and family for their support, Understanding, acceptance, and being available for whatever odd thing I needed. A huge thank you to Sarah LaRue for slogging through my garbage writing and making sure that my ideas were readable.

Finally, I would like to thank my incredible partner, Amanda Killeen. On the other side of the Atlantic and working on her own degree, she was always there for me. She is a source of endless encouragement, patience, and understanding. She is the first one to tell me that everything will work out and stood by me to make sure that they do.

Table of Contents

Abstract I

Acknowledgments II

Table of Contents III

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 - Foundations of Comic Theory 14

Genre vs Medium 15

Defining Comics 17

Chapter 2 - Communicating With the Reader 25

Mise En Page 29

Restricted Arthrology & Closure 35

Braiding 39

Chapter 3 - Logonomic Systems and Dominant Positions 46

The Comics Code 48

The Dominant Reading Position 54

Comics Discourse 63

The Discrete Genders 66

How Representation is Constrained 70

Chapter 4 - Powers/Sexuality 93

The Role of Power 98

Patriarchy Dependent Power 103

Paging Dr. Isley 109

Super Powered Puberty 115

Rogue and the Myth of the Southern Belle 121

Phoenix and Fear of the Female Orgasm 132

The Consuming Nature of Female Sexuality 141

She's a Wonder, Wonder Woman 148

The Monstrous Amazon 156

Monogamy and Female Sexuality 161

Chapter 5 - Body/Costume 167

Costumes and Power 168

Costumes and the Body 175

A Brief History of Female Comic Bodies 181

Good Girls vs. Bad Girls 190

Putting Psylocke Back Together Again 294

The Female Gendered Body 201

Broke Backs and Breasts 208

The Retconned Body 216

Silicone Parts and Bodily Manipulation 225

Here Kitty Kitty 235

Chapter 6 - Identity 241

No One Must Ever Know Who I Really Am 243

Who Was That Masked Woman? 247

Batgirls Eternal 249

That's Not a Batman. That's a BatWoman 256

Storm: Queen, Goddess, Mutant 263

Say Hello to Your New Improved Harley Quinn 274

Mad Woman in Genosha 287

Conclusion 303

Bibliography 321

Introduction

At the 2014 Image Comics Expo, keynote speaker and publisher Eric Stephenson told the assembled crowd of journalists, critics, and fans, "Now, more than ever, there are comics that actually appeal to a readership beyond the audience our industry has spent so much time servicing since comics' resurgence in the 1960s."[1] As a long-time fan of comics himself, Stephenson had seen and understood as a reader, writer, and publisher the audience that the comic industry had been catering to and trying to attract. Through the Silver Age, Bronze Age[2], and Modern Age[3] of comics, the major American publishers, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, had provided stories about men, for men. The women that did appear in these comics tended to be after-thoughts to the major publishers of superhero comics. The female characters, especially in the predominant superhero genre of comics, fell into stereotypical moulds of female representation that had been cast in the 1960s. They were mothers, wives, girlfriends, femme fatales, or simply pin-ups and sexualized bodies for the male readership to ogle. For the first time in almost 50 years of continuous publishing, Stephenson and others had started to see a shift away from an almost exclusively male dominated medium and readership.

---

[1] Eric Stephenson "Eric Stephenson's Keynote From the Sand Diego Image Expo" *Comics Alliance* (June 25, 2014) <http://comicsalliance.com/eric-stephenson-keynote-address-san-diego-image-expo/>

[2] Comic historians divide the publication history of comics into distinct ages. These eras are the Golden Age (1938-1950), the Silver Age (1956-1970), the Bronze Age (1970-1985), and the Modern Age (1985-Present)

[3] Some scholars and historians have tried to break the Modern Age into two separate eras. The Dark Age comprises comics published from 1985 to 2000 and is marked by a more adult themes and a dark, gritty, and violent style. The new Modern Age begins in 2000, as Marvel Comics emerged from bankruptcy, and continues to the present. For the purpose of this thesis, we will use the term Modern Age in the traditional sense to mean the publication of comics from 1985 to the present.

Where other narrative industries have seen more prevalent shifts in female representation, comics, and most specifically, superhero comics have stayed stagnant. Because of the unique nature of comic production, consumption, and distribution, the comic industry has been able to cultivate and consecrate a specific audience. In return for their monthly patronage, that audience, or reading position, receives an expected meaning, idea, and representation within the perpetual narrative of superhero comics. This is in line with Pierre Bourdieu's assertions that producers would rather deliver recognizable and accepted content and meaning to an already cultivated and consecrated audience than alter that content and meaning to attract a wider audience. The producer's fear is that by changing the content and meaning they are delivering to their consecrated audience, they risk losing their already existing and devout readership.[4] This audience consumes comics through comic shops, specialized points of distribution, and expects specific narratives and narrative tropes and isotopies within their comics. This relationship between publishers and consumers has given rise to a relationship that privileges a perceived dominant reading position.

This almost symbiotic relationship is achieved through what Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, in their book *Social Semiotics,* call the Logonomic System. This system is an unmarked and mostly unnoticed apparatus that takes into account the means of production, consumption, and relationship between audience and producer to deliver a constrained and desired meaning.[5]

---

[4] Pierre Bourdieu *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* Trans Randal Johnson (New York: ColumbiaUP, 1993) p. 16

[5] Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress *Social Semiotics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) p. 4

After so many years of continually catering to a male-centric reading position, the representation and gendered expectations of female characters in superhero comics have become a performance of femaleness. As Judith Butler says, "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed."[6] Gender, especially the ideas of female and femaleness on display in superhero comics is a socially and culturally constructed fiction. These performances and representations in superhero comics are only real so far as they are made real "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."[7] As the superhero narratives at DC Comics and Marvel Comics have grown and expanded over years, the logonomic system continually works to reactivate and reconstitute the desires and expectations of the dominant reading position through repetition of acts and practices.

Within superhero comics, performance goes beyond just a dogged attempt to connect bodily sex and gender, but also in making sure that characters act, appear, and function narratively based on gendered expectations. The way female characters are placed in panels, the construction of their bodies and costumes, their powers, as well as their origins and identities are all ways that they can be seen to be performing an expected and culturally constructed femaleness. As Butler herself points out, linguistic and narrative utterances are forms of practice and places where acts can be continually

---

[6] Judith Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988) p. 278

[7] ibid p. 274

reactivated and reconstituted.[8] Within mainstream superhero comics, the logonomic system works to transmit ideas of female power, sexual roles, and performance to the dominant reading position.

Judith Butler's theories of gender performance and Hodge and Kress's theory of the logonomic system are at the core of this thesis; not only in examining the questions of how and what types of messages about women and female representation superhero comics communicate, but also in the selection of a corpus and the type of analysis that will be used throughout. While comic theory and scholarship has grown recently, many of the major foundational texts such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art,* are not academically rigorous and primarily focus on how comics work and what comics are. Like the theorist Thierry Groensteen - whose work will be examined more in depth in chapter 2 of this thesis - there is the need to bring in both cultural and critical theories to expand the scope of discussion and analysis of the medium. Where much of current comics criticism about superhero comics focuses on the single issue and line wide continuity, the work of critical and cultural theorists like Butler, Hodge and Kress, and others open up the examination of comics to not just the texts, but how those texts are affected by larger apparatus and cultural structures. Judith Butler, in particular, provides tools to better understand the construction of gender both physically and socially and provides tools to help with the selection of a corpus for examination.

---

[8] Judith Butler "Performativity's Social Magic." *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, Edited by Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p. 120

With a history and body of published work that covers 75 plus years, the superhero comic has one of the largest collections of interconnected narratives in existence. For examining Marvel and DC, who since the 1960s have enforced and thrived on massive shared universes[9] that all of their individual characters exists in, narrowing down a corpus can be a difficult proposition. Overall, this thesis looks at comics through the Silver, Bronze, and Modern ages. Some time is spent on comics from the Golden age (Pre 1960s) but mostly to provide cultural and historical context for the medium and genre as a whole. By primarily looking at comics post 1960 and after the adoption of the Comics Code, brings the focus on a time period where the superhero genre of comics started dominating the medium and a predominantly male readership was beginning to be cultivated and consecrated. However, even with this narrowing down of the publication history of comics, issues remain on narrowing the focus of analysis and require other parameters to help shape the corpus of this thesis.

Part of the purpose of Marvel and DC's shared universe models is to make it so readers have to buy every issue of every comic in the line to get the full story. Though this isn't necessary to the enjoyment of the narratives, it does put forward an idea that every issue matters, and that every issue counts in some way. Even with this, many fans, critics, and scholars have tried, like in other narrative mediums, to construct a canon of the most important and praiseworthy stories. Some have debated over a comics canon while others have attempted to construct a canon that focus exclusively on superhero

---

[9] Essentially, all of the characters published by DC comics exist in the same universe. Superman can fly to Batman's Gotham and Wonder Woman can visit Nightwing in Bloodhaven. Similarly, Spider-Man, Daredevil, and Iron Man all live in the same New York city constructed by Marvel. At any time Dr. Strange could conceivably look out his window in Greenwich Village and see the Fantastic Four fly by.

comics. A major issue in trying to use these canons as a template for the selection of a corpus in this thesis is that these cannons are continually under debate and shifting. An even more pressing problem, is that because superhero comics have been such a male dominated genre for so long, women and female experience is almost completely absent from these canons. So, for the purpose of this thesis' corpus, Butler's theories on how performance and gender are constructed have served as a guiding force.

Since Butler asserts that gender is constructed "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time"[10] it is important to look at how female characters have been presented and constituted over a period of time. By using textual analysis, following a female character as she appears in major storylines, as the focus of a major event, or during a significant time period it becomes more possible to see if expectations of gender performance and gendered acts are being repeated and reconstituted. Female characters like Wonder Woman, Jean Grey, Rogue, and Batgirl have been around for decades and examining them as characters instead of a focus on story lines allows a stronger examination of consolidation of expectations and performance.

Hand in hand with changes over time, the corpus will also select from specifi points in character history when reboots[11] or retcons[12] of characters have occurred. This is an important space for analysis because reboots and retcons offer a chance for dominant

---

[10] Butler "Performative Acts" op cit p. 274

[11] In comics, a "reboot" means to discard all continuity in an established series or universe to recreate its characters, timeline, and backstory from the beginning.

[12] Retcon is an abbreviation of Retroactive Continuity. Usually this is when a piece of new information is introduced that imposes a different interpretation on previously described events, typically used to facilitate a dramatic plot shift or account for an inconsistency.

positions to reactivate or reconstitute desired meaning and expectations. As Butler theorizes, gender and gender performance are formed and constantly forming and it is during moments of major change that dominant groups are able to step in and reassert their constructions, forcing them onto a field unnoticed.[13] Reboots and retcons mark major moments of change and upheaval in the Marvel and DC comic universes. These are moments when entire origins can be rewritten, characters redesigned, powers altered, and relationships fractured. In major events like *Secret Wars*, *Civil War*, *Infinite Crisis*, or *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the status quo of these comic universes are altered and the dominant position, through the logonomic system, can have expectations reactivated and dominance reconstituted within the narrative. By looking at the changes made to female characters before and after major reboots like DC's New 52 Relaunch, it becomes possible to see how expectations of gender and performance become reconstituted within the narrative and in visual representations.

Finally, origin stories play an important role in the superhero genre and in the narratives under examination here. Judith Butler states that "being called a 'girl' from the inception of existence is a way in which the girl becomes transitively 'girled' over time."[14] Similarly, if the origin story of a female character constitutes her femaleness according to the gendered construction produced in superhero comics, it makes that female character constrained and subject to the expectations of that gendered construction. By looking at the origin stories of characters like She-Hulk and Harley

---

[13] Butler "Social Magic" op cit pp. 119-120

[14] ibid p. 120

Quinn, it becomes possible to see how they are constructed from the beginning as female and inscribed with all the expectations that come with that.

It is these origin stories and how they have become part of the tropes and isotopies of the superhero genre that also influence the focus of analysis in this thesis.[15] The trajectory of analysis will be grouped into the three major parts of the construction of a hero. Within the superhero genre, any character that hopes to participate in the superhero world needs powers, a costume, and a new identity. Analysis will begin with an examination of power: how it functions narratively, how it is given and received differently across gender, and how it also works metaphorically as discourse about sex and sexuality. Next, the analysis will focus on the superhero costume and the construction of the gendered body. It will examine how costumes work to create iconic representations and communicate ideas about the wearer's powers. Finally, with powers and a costume in place, the powered beings in superhero narratives are able to adopt their new identities. In looking at identities, the thesis will examine how identity is constructed for both male and female characters. It will also look at the role that identity plays in constraining and dictating female gendered performance, narrowing the possibilities of representation for female characters.

In terms of structure, the thesis is divided into two parts. In order to provide the appropriate background, history, and theoretical context for the analysis of the characters and texts central to my argument, the first part of the thesis (Chapters 1 to 3) will look at

---

[15] It should be briefly noted that these tropes and isotopies of the genre will also require some brief examinations of adaptations of the superhero genre into other mediums. Because some acts of gender performance have become so redundant within the genre, they are perceived as integral to how the genre is defined. These acts and isotopies often find themselves passing through the adaptation process and into films and television based on Marvel and DC characters.

issues in regards to the historical and current scholarship in the field of comics and comic studies. In these chapters I will also construct a theoretical and analytical framework which will provide a context, scope, and lens for the thesis' argument and analysis. The second part (Chapters 4 to 6) will look at the three steps to constructing a superhero or villain and track the path from power, to costume, and finally to the birth of a new identity.

Chapter 1 will look at some of the concerns and debates surrounding comics and comic studies. This chapter takes the place of what many would consider a literature review. It examines the way various scholars have attempted, and debated, the definition of the medium and how these definitions have influenced the emphasis that is placed on different aspects of comics as well as the positions taken up by major scholars in the field. It also sets up the language used to talk about comics, what we call them and how they work. I will also address the struggle for legitimacy within the field as well as in a wider academic context.

Chapter 2 will look at ideas of form and how comics tell stories and transmit meaning. Using theories put forward by Thierry Groensteen and Scott McCloud, this chapter will look at the techniques used by creators to create narrative movement and flow, as well as give the illusion of time, action, and sound. I will also look at the necessary engagement between creators and readers in order to construct meaning and the role the reader plays in the active construction of narrative.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical lens and context of the thesis and how it works with the ideas in Chapter 2 to frame the analysis of the characters and texts in the second

part of the thesis. This chapter will go more in-depth to look at the concept of the logonomic system, how it works, how it was constructed, and the role it plays in the production and consumption of superhero comics. To understand these points, we will take a brief look at the history of comics publishing and the constituting of the current direct market system. Along with that, this chapter will also examine the perceived dominant reading position, how it is defined and what its expectations are. With an understanding of these expectations, the chapter will then look at how we can evaluate and recognize representations that exist to meet the dominant position's expectations. These expectations and representations will be highlighted through close analysis of a variety of examples in relation to the later chapters examining power, costume, and identity. As a whole, the thesis relies on the observations made in Chapters 2 and 3. They provide the context, foundation, and theoretical lens used to examine the corpus of the thesis.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the second part of the thesis and the beginning of the formal analysis of female character construction and representation. This chapter will specifically focus on the acquisition of powers and the role powers play in the formation of a new identity. It will compare the ways that male and female characters obtain power, and the passive role that females play in the receiving of power. It will look at characters like She-Hulk and Poison Ivy and their powers' dependence on men and already constituted sources power. Along with the examination of powers, this chapter will examine the connection between powers and sex or sexuality. It will look at the metaphor of gaining powers as synonymous with puberty and the gaining of a sexual

identity. With this metaphor, we will look at Jean Grey, a.k.a Phoenix and Wonder Woman and the expectation that female power and sexuality should be controlled by patriarchal authority, because without that control, female sexuality and power can be dangerous and monstrous.

Chapter 5 focuses on the costume as the visual and iconic representation of a character and their powers. The costume also works to shape and define the super powered body and the way that gendered bodies should perform and appear. By examining the different ways that costumes are designed for male and female characters and the way bodies are positioned and presented in panels, I will show that male characters are visually represented to display power, strength, and masculinity, while female characters are stripped and exposed to be seen, ogled, and objectified. By looking at different character's costumes, body positioning, and redesigns we can start to see the expectation of physical identifiers of sex and the gendered body. I will also look at comic's obsession with female breasts, curves, and an exposed body as markers of value. This chapter will examine superhero tropes such as the Broke Back Pose, and the Over/ Under. Both of these are artistic choices that are meant to draw focus and attention to primal indicators of femaleness. It will also look at characters like Voodoo, Catwoman, Psylocke, and Starfire. These are characters who are designed and posed to place their powers and personality secondary to their gender and stripped bodies.

Chapter 6 takes the concepts of power/sexuality and costumes/body into consideration to discuss the formation and rebirth of the super-powered identity. This chapter will look at how male identity and experience is vast and varied, but female

identity and experience is constrained and rooted in perceptions of femaleness. In particular, we will look at how femaleness is constructed as foreign and alien to the dominant position and how it requires male control and context to even be understood. To examine these ideas, we will look at characters that exist in spaces dominated by patriarchal control such as Storm of the mutant team X-Men, and the Batgirls and Batwomen of Batman's Gotham City. These characters all require patriarchal authority to define and legitimize their identities. Harley Quinn and Oracle are then used as examples of characters that have been normalized through reboots, retcons and the logonomic system to constrain their independent identities and placing them firmly back under patriarchal authority. To finish this chapter, I will look in depth at the monster/angel dichotomy and how superhero comics work to punish monster women who are unconstrained and normalize other characters to the submissive and sexually available angel identity.

Finally, the conclusion will look briefly at the fissures and breaks in the logonomic system. With the advent of digital comics, and the decentralization of the comic shop as the primary source of comic consumption, more and more reading positions have started to enter the field of comics, making titles that would have previously languished publishing juggernauts. Often these titles and new representations of female characters would have been seen as contrary or subversive to the expectations of the dominant reading position, but now are considered the new normal. This causes the logonomic system to become less accurate and effective, forcing publishers to begin

taking into consideration the potential of new and vocal reading positions vying for space in the comics field.

Chapter 1 - Foundations of Comic Theory

When it comes to the examination of any medium's aesthetics, a central concern is the form of the medium. This is especially true in the examination of comics. While the history of comics and its development has been well-chronicled, the medium itself has spent very little time under critical examination until recently. The history of comics criticism is relatively short and only now beginning to develop a vocabulary and system that is unique to the medium. In early attempts at comics criticism, comics were examined as a niche extension of film or literary studies, in particular finding popularity with semiotic readings during the late 70s and early 80s.[16] As comics have experienced a resurgence of popularity, interest in the possibilities the medium provides for critical examination and academic scholarship has also grown. Critics like Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, Douglas Wolk, Thierry Groensteen, R.C. Harvey, and Samuel Delany have all argued, with some success, that comics, as a medium, need to be examined and evaluated on their own and to no longer be beholden to the fields of literary and film criticism.[17] However, for this sort of separation of fields to occur, a clearer understanding of how comics function and differentiate themselves from other artistic mediums must be understood. As Mila Bongco points out, "The concept of comics as a distinct art form must be an accepted premise in the analysis of comics as an art."[18] While there is still a

---

[16] Thierry Groensteen *The System of Comics* Trans Bart Beatty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007) p. 2

[17] Douglas Wolk *Reading Comics: How graphic Novels Work and What they Mean* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2007) pp. 26-34

[18] Mila Bongco *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York, London: Garland Books, 2000) p. 46

tendency to rely on evaluative terms and critical frameworks from other areas of creative and narrative expressions, especially from literary criticism, to examine comics, Douglas Wolk points out that the largest flaw in this continued use is that, "comics criticism actually works pretty differently from literary criticism-partly because what drawings do is very different from what words do."[19] The very nature of comics make it difficult for other forms of criticism to evenly and adequately evaluate all aspects of the medium. Though viewing comics in relation to other mediums will help readers see the unique functions of comics, it is also vital to be familiar with the evaluative terms that are unique to the comics medium. This allows for the construct of an appropriate theoretical framework that can allow comics to be accurately and fully examined by critics and scholars.[20]

Genre vs Medium

One of the most common mistakes made by early comic scholars was the genre/ medium confusion. This confusion is somewhat understandable. During periods of boom for comics, one or two particular genres have seen significant popularity and have become part of a wider cultural awareness.[21] Most people's initial contact with the medium has been through the most prevalent genre in comics, the superhero genre. The superhero genre was invented in the pages of comics with the introduction of Superman in 1938.[22] His success sparked the birth of other costumed heroes with amazing powers

---

[19] Wolk op cit p. 33

[20] Bongco op cit p. 14

[21] Paul Levitz *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Myth Making* (Koln: Taschen, 2010) pp. 52-7

[22] ibib p. 47-8

and abilities. Since that time, superheroes have maintained a high level of success and popularity, and the superhero genre is the most prolific genre published in the medium today. An estimated 90% of comics published monthly fall into the superhero genre. In fact, the genre has become so prolific, that for a time, the term "comic book" as a pejorative became synonymous with superhero concepts and tropes.[23] The genre has also found itself adapted to fit other mediums. In fact, superheroes can be found in radio dramas, novels, Hollywood blockbusters, and even on Broadway stages.[24]

Though if a genre is popular within a medium that does not mean that it is the only thing that defines that particular medium. Western, horror, noir, romance are all genres, stories that are framed by specific conventions, tropes, subjects, and clichés. Sculpture, film, and prose fiction, like comics, are all mediums or forms of expression whose content is only hampered by broad rules imposed by their specific form. Comics can be found representing all of the aforementioned genres and many more. Even with this understanding, the genre confusion still seems to persist.[25] Confusion aside, it is the prevalence of the superhero genre that is at the core of this particular thesis and academic inquiry. The superhero genre is most seen by the public, because it is the genre most published by the largest comic publishers, Marvel Comics and DC Comics. It is a genre that is central to the systems of production, consumption, marketing, and

---

[23] Wolk op cit pp. 89-90

[24] Levits op cit p. 702

[25] Anne Magnussen "The Semiotics of C.S. Peirce" in *Comics & Culture* ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000) p. 199 Most notably, Magnussen believes that more research should be done before declaring comics a medium instead of a genre, in particular she views them as a narrative genre alongside the novel and short story. Though she does not discuss film, or the fact that it is a narrative form, but recognized as its own medium.

distribution of comics as a whole. It was Marvel and DC moving their superhero lines of comics away from news stands into specialty comic shops that forced other publishers, despite the genres they may have published, to follow suit. However, with the dominance, primacy, and visibility of the superhero genre, the tropes, clichés, and, in particular, the representations of the genre should not be misconstrued as definers of the medium as a whole. Because of this, it is important to understand what comics as a distinct and unique narrative medium, larger and more diverse than the prevalence of superheroes may suggest. To make the distinction of comics as a medium clearer, looking at comics in relation to other narrative mediums and specifically what comics do that other mediums can not do is neccessary. While the form does share narrative techniques with literature, film, and theater, by examining the comic form and its relation to the audience, a clear outline as a unique medium is established.[26]

Defining Comics

One of the earliest and most often revisited arguments in the discussion of comics as a medium has been how to define what is and is not a comic. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, essentially a comic about comics, attempted to outline the origins of and define the medium as a whole. McCloud explains that comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[27] This set the terms of debate and represents one side of the divide to define the very nature of comics: what they are and

---

[26] Wolk op cit p. 21

[27] Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Paradox Press/DC, 1994) p. 9

what they can do. McCloud's definition puts emphasis on the sequential nature of comic images to create boundaries, a system of analysis, and a historical origin of the medium. For McCloud, a comic artist and writer himself, and those that fall into his camp, the comic is defined by the image and the way multiple images work in conjunction with each other. This is in opposition to the work of R.C. Harvey, who places his emphasis on the juxtaposition of word and image to define comics. As Harvey puts it, "The essential characteristic of comics is the incorporation of verbal content."[28]

Most critics subscribe to some variation on these two theories. In his research, the art and cultural critic, David Carrier sides with Harvey, even suggesting that without the inclusion of the word balloon, a comic could not be defined as such. He says, "The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text."[29] Oppositely, the French theorist and semiologist, Thierry Groensteen, supports McCloud in asserting that any definition of comics must look to the primacy of the image and its sequence and arrangement on the page over anything else. However, he does concede that the inclusion of text within the image/panel structure is important, but that it should be evaluated as a part of that structure as apposed to an individual component.[30] Some theorists, such as Mila Bongco, acknowledges that there is an imbalance created when the text or the image is valued over the other, arguing that comics are created and published that function

---

[28] Heer Jeet. *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2009) p. 113

[29] David Carrier *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) p. 64

[30] Groensteen op cit pp. 3-4

without text, but asserts that the absence of text is a significant part of the way those comics deliver their narrative, and so creating a relationship of necessary tension between the two narrative tools.[31]

However, as the debate over defining the medium continues, more and more critics have seen the constant attempts at definition to be problematic.[32] Many of these critics feel that comics criticism has suffered because of the perpetual debate. They feel that a definition serves only to build cultural capital for a particular ideology and create a specific lineage of comics. In his essay on paraliterary criticism, Samuel Delany points out that definition, along with origin, are the first major points that critics attempt to nail down to use as markers for legitimizing value, but that these two markers are also "the two that critics have used most widely to impede artistic change."[33] Once the medium is defined in such an essentialist way, anything that strays across those borders is automatically removed from the medium and loses any legitimization or value ascribed to the medium. Douglas Wolk takes this idea even further as he asserts that "if you try to draw a boundary that includes everything that counts as comics and excludes everything that doesn't...the medium always wriggles across that boundary."[34]

---

[31] Bongco op cit pp.45-7

[32] Groensteen op cit pp. 12-7 While agreeing with McCloud on the importance of image, Groensteen stresses that the definitions of comics that are out there are both unsatisfactory and unacceptable, going so far as to title a section of his book, "The impossible Definition". He asserts that the common element of comics, is how they work. More on this later.

[33] Samuel R. Delany *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, London: Weleyan University Press, 1999) p. 245

[34] Douglas Wolk *Reading Comics: How graphic Novels Work and What they Mean* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2007) p. 17

McCloud's definition, along with stating what comics are, also attempts to define what comics should not be.[35] Specifically, a definition of comics that values the image over anything else puts emphasis on the work of the artist as opposed to the writer. Though many comics are both written and drawn by the same individual, many of the most iconic superhero comics are created through collaboration, with one person writing the script that is handed off to be drawn by someone else.

This is a particularly important point in relation to the comics under examination in this thesis. The superhero comics published by Marvel and DC are marked by their collaborative construction. Most famously, the collaboration between writer Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko are foundational to the birth and early successes of Marvel Comics. Those collaborations are the template by which modern, mainstream comics are constructed. By privileging just the art or the writing over the other also privileges one creator over the other. Beyond building a definition, these attempts at defining the whole medium creates markers and spaces of value and positions within the field; privileging one genre or collaborator over the other.

The real question surrounding these attempts at defining the medium becomes, what is gained by an essentialist definition? Pierre Bourdieu argues that when any field is being constructed, there arises a specific struggle for the construction of space and positions. Over time, these positions will "defines success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field."[36]

---

[35]Dylan Horrocks "Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud's Definition of Comics" *Comics Journal* (June 2001, 234) p. 28 p. 29.

[36] Pierre Bourdieu *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* Trans Randal Johnson (New York: ColumbiaUP, 1993) p. 30

By subscribing to any of the particular definitions already set forth, an individual is being marked as a product of an ideology. The dominant definition creates the system of value and success within the field, and with that system in place, dictates the nature of comic production and how the field is perceived externally.[37]

McCloud's definition and its construction of a comics ancestry is used in the hopes of conferring legitimacy, credibility, status, and value on a medium that he sees as disenfranchised and culturally devalued.[38] Wolk argues that this is an ineffective way to garner cultural capital for the medium and that "there's not much to be gained from that kind of ancestor seeking, other than a kind of validation that salves nothing but insecurity."[39] Even if an agreed upon ancestry or definition can be found, there are few scholars or academics who would accept or consecrate comics based on this borrowed form of value.

As Bourdieu points out, the system that imparts and consecrates symbolic and cultural capital of a medium, and sets the hierarchy of the field, overlaps with the degree of consecration of the audience.[40] The perceived dichotomy is that comic books, and by extension the superhero genre, are childish, low-quality, poorly-written, low-class, and culturally worthless. Graphic novel is the term used when implying seriousness, maturity,

---

[37] ibib pp.54-5

[38] Scott McCloud *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form* (New York: Perennnial, 2000) p. 7

[39] Wolk op cit p. 29

[40] Bourdieu op cit p. 46

well-written, higher-class, and culturally worthwhile. This dichotomy has also become synonymous with stereotypes about the audiences of comics and graphic novels.[41]

There has grown a perception that a comic's content is inextricably linked to the social context of the reader.[42] The graphic novel reader is perceived as mature, educated, well-read, thin, healthy, and attractive, while the comic book reader is maladjusted, illiterate, infantile, obese, unwashed, and unattractive.[43] These perceptions also take a gendered appearance; comic books are for boys, graphic novels are for everyone. These perceptions of audience effect the external perception of these terms, as well as how publishers make decisions on the content of titles. The distribution of symbolic and cultural capital from external sources is seen in the fact that comic books do not find their way onto book prize short lists or class syllabi. However, graphic novels are now the subject of academic courses of study and winners of Pulitzer Prizes.[44] This dichotomy has become so prevalent and ideologically entrenched that in order to facilitate a specific audience's ideas of value and capital, comic publishers and creators have altered production habits and the content of their comics, a cause and effect that is at the core of how the logonomic system works and perpetuates itself in mainstream comic publishing.

For my part in the research of the comics field, I choose to examine rather than to enter into the debates over definitions, ancestry, and labels. Any definition or label I could concoct or provide would, in the end, prove lacking. Like Thierry Groensteen, I am

---

[41] Wolk op cit pp. 29-30

[42] ibib p. 69

[43] ibib p. 68

[44] ibib pp. 11-4

far more concerned with how comics work, how they transmit meaning, and the type of meaning that is being communicated. For the purpose of this thesis and the topics under examination I subscribe to Samuel Delany's advice to comic critics:

> "Why should someone...attempt to strait his arguments and observations of his cherished object within the restrictive wall of definition? Won't careful analytic description of what is vital, intriguing, newly noticed, and wondrous about comics (what they are; how they work) finally do the job much better?…I would like to see the criticism of comics grow up. And it will not, until it can abandon that galaxy of notions, origins mastery craft-and definition."[45]

More than defining, labeling or discovering its origins, it is often the role of the critic within a new field to stand up and describe something that interests them within the medium, critically.[46] Delany does highlight the importance that *Understanding Comics* had on the development of comic studies in the English speaking world. Because *Understanding Comics* and other pioneering texts of formal criticism in English have primarily come from creators of comics, the books were written for fellow creators, fans of the medium, and the interested public.[47] While attempts are made to appeal to a critical theory audience, most of these texts had little intention to, and in the end do not, stand up well to academic scrutiny. Delaney sums up the primary problem with *Understanding Comics* when he says the work is, "an intricate interweave of insight and idiocy, played

---

[45] Delany op cit pp. 244-5

[46] Wolk op cit p. 64

[47] For example Robert C. Harvey and Will Eisner

out against a set of wildly inaccurate historical assumptions."[48] It was not until Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen's translation of Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* that a more academically rigorous text became available to English speaking critics. It should not be assumed that Groensteen replaces or supplants McCloud, but instead builds on the discussion and principals of analysis set out by McCloud that will form the basis for a critical vocabulary for much of this thesis.

[48] Delany op cit pp. 224, 249

Chapter 2 - Communicating With the Reader

In order to examine the way women are represented in comics, specifically in superhero comics, and are presented to the reader, it is necessary to layout the analytical framework that I will use to examine the actual content of comics. In addition to this presentation of women to readers, I will also examine the role readers play in the creation of meaning. These frameworks are connected not only to the way that the comic narrative art form is presented and read, but also how production, audience, and positions within the comics field can effect the coding and decoding of the narrative and its components. While many of the narrative and story telling techniques are universal across the medium, there are many tropes, styles, and syntagm that are specific to a particular genre or format of comic publishing and distribution. This represents part of the promise offered to readers by the logonomic system; that they can expect the delivery of a specific codes, meaning, and narrative cues when engaging with a familiar text.

As a visual narrative art, comics produce meaning from images and their relationship with each other. These images co-exist spatially with or without text. Comics produce meaning from the articulation between these discontinuous image units, or "panels," and create a connected system that produces narrative utterances. Some scholars have tried to compare the panel in a comic to the frame or shot in film, small pieces, that when put together begin to form the whole of the narrative.[49] Gronsteen, says that the panel is not equivalent to the shot, and that there really is no equivalent in any

---

[49] McCloud op cit p. 8; Wolk op cit p. 13 This comparison is born out of a need to compare the panel to something recognizable to most audiences. Wolk quickly points out that as a filmic term, shot offers problems as a describer within comics.

other medium. He says, “Its loose status is intermediate between that of the shot and that of the photogram, sometimes bringing together the one and the other according to what occurs.”[50] When presented on the page, the panel is a portion of space and time, isolated by blank spaces (the gutters) and enclosed by a frame that insures its integrity. While traditionally, panels have been square or rectangle, often fitting nine panels to a page, today the size, number, and shape of the panel varies and these variations can play a part in the narrative’s sequential continuum.[51]

When we analyze the way articulation operates within the comic, we are looking at the meaning created through syntagmatic links between words and images as well as the links between panels. Like Saussure’s example of the syntagmatic chain,[52] part of a panel’s meaning can be understood by its relation to the panels that surround it. However, unlike the syntagmatic chain, where meaning is created in a linear, pre-existing and repetitive way such as in English where a sentence is read left to right,[53] panels can create meaning from linear relationships and non-linear relationships. This creates a syntagmatic web instead of a syntagmatic chain.

In his definition and discussion of comics, Scott McCloud’s theories put focus on a very linear way of meaning being created between panels through transitions (closure) from one panel to the next.[54] This transition is so vital to how McCloud sees comics and

---

[50] Groensteen op cit pp. 25-6

[51] ibib p. 26

[52] Ferdinand De, Saussure *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle Ill: Open Court, 1986) p. 127

[53] Of course, in the popular manga comics of Japan, this order is top to bottom, right to left.

[54] McCloud op cit p. 67

how they tell stories, that it is at the core of his definition of the medium.[55] While meaning is undoubtedly created this way, the panel immediately before and after a particular panel do not provide the only points of transition and closure, or ways that meaning within a panel can be created. The main source of meaning in most comics is created through the pre-existing and repetitive transition from one panel to the next, meaning can also be created through transitions and connections with panels in a non-linear fashion. A single panel can be given deeper meaning from its connection to panels that exist above it, below it, multiple panels away, a panel that was on the final page of last month's issue, or even a panel in a comic from 75 years ago.


Fig. 1 Reputation of picture

Non-linear points of closure are vital to creating meaning within many comics. Instead of meaning moving from one panel to the next, the way a sentence moves from the beginning to its full stop, the meaning of the final panel on a page can often be dependent on the first panel of that page or the panel exactly opposite on the previous page. A prime example of the syntagmatic web connecting narrative utterances and creating meaning along an entire issue, can be found in chapter four of Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.(Fig 1) Throughout the narrative Moore and Gibbons use a

[55] ibib p.9

similar panel again and again, stacking a new level of context and linear meaning with each use. However, each use is connected to the meaning already created by a previous use of the image. While meaning is created for each of these panels slightly differently through closure and juxtaposition by the panels preceding and following them, meaning is also constructed based on their connection to the similar panel that preceded it. This helps construct meaning from page one, to page five, and even carrying on until the final page where meaning is being constructed and communicated through each previous instant of the panel's appearance.[56]

Instead of a meaning that moves along in only a linear way, meaning in comics moves along a web that can create meaning along a number of different, sometimes shifting, connections with multiple other syntagm and narrative utterances. The unique nature of how comics are presented is what allows for meaning to form and exist in a web. On a single comic page, a reader is given access to multiple narrative utterances and panels simultaneously. Thus readers, through the same type of closure that occurs linearly from panel to panel, can begin creating meaning between panels that are not yet fully connected to the rest of the narrative. As McCloud has stated,[57] the comic narrative, with its collection of panels and gutters, is the visual representation of fractured time and space. Closure allows readers to turn these into a unified reality. The act of closure is constant and readers will continually try and unify time and space across all of the panels they have access to. It is because of the importance of the panel and the meaning created

---

[56] Alan Moore (w) and Dave Gibbons (a) *Watchmen* #4 (DC Comics December 1986) pp. 1, 5, 24, 28

[57] McCloud op cit p. 67

by it and its positioning, that analysis that takes into consideration the relationship of one panel to another is so useful in analyzing comic texts.

Within comics, panel is the priority term and holds theoretical privilege. Through analysis and critical examination, one can break up a panel into the components that it holds, but one cannot reduce the panel. The panel is the basic fundamental unit of the comic. It is capable of holding all things (balance, tension, dynamism) and be all things (iconic, plastic, verbal). Within the panel, comic words and images enter into a fusion that creates new meaning. The illustrations, typography and calligraphy, or absence of one of these components, create something new through their use and function within the panel.[58] According to Groensteen, while the mix of image and text are important and represent two core elements of the medium, it is the organization of the panel and its contents, image, text, and other elements (i.e. word balloons, caption boxes, frames, and gutters), that make the medium possible and distinct. Groensteen refers to this as the "Spatio-Topical system" and that an understanding of the Mise-en-Page (the arrangement of elements on the individual page) is vital to both analysis and creation within the medium.[59]

Mise En Page

Groensteen uses the term 'arthrology' for the codes that govern the type of meaning created along the syntagmatic web. Where McCloud's ideas of closure focuses on the creation of movement, both temporal and physical, from panel to panel, arthrology

---

[58] ibib pp. 24-7

[59] ibib p. 21

is focused on the meaning that is created between panels. Groensteen specifically highlights three types of arthrology at work in comic story telling. The first type of arthrology focuses on the spatial layout of panels, the mise en page or spatio-topical code. The function of mise en page and the relationship between panels on a page is often seen in the way a panel's size, shape, or position on the page effects the narrative. As Scott McCloud points out, space on a comic page is equal to time,[60] so a large panel can be seen to take more time than a smaller one. A panel that has a frame that is cloud-like or dappled around the edges, when juxtaposed against other panels with a solid lined frame, can be used to represent dream or unconsciousness against the solid, concrete waking reality. The position of a panel on a page or in relation to the other panels around it allows for links and construction of meaning separate from the meaning created solely in the gutters. Mise en page is one way that comic creators can provide transition and meaning without relying solely on the traditional large white gutters. Because the panel in a comic has no predetermined size or shape, the mise en page can present a near infinite number of possibilities. However, as with literature, certain mise en page designs and layouts have become cliche or tropes of the medium, creating metonyms that allow readers to create more seamless transitions. In Chris Ware's *Acme Novelty Library #19*, he uses mise en page to create the concept of fractured memory by placing multiple, equally sized panels, in a disjointed order, very close together. This arrangement lets the reader see multiple experiences of the main character in much the way human memory works, as fragments that are connected in unique ways, flowing in multiple directions. While in

---

[60] ibib p. 101

this instance, Ware uses mise en page to create fragmentation and a sense of chaos, or fracture, mise on page is most often used to create a sense of order, hierarchy, and chronology. (Fig. 2)[61]



Fig. 2 Chris Ware and fractured memory

While the idea of a syntagmatic web denotes meaning being constructed from varying and non-repetitive sources, most of the narrative structure is still based on a linear narrative and moves in an intuitive way. For this, mise en page can communicate to readers the author's intention for them to slow down, speed up, or move from panel to panel in a a more directed way. For many early comics, the mise en page was simple. The standard nine panel grid favored by early creators had equally shaped and spaced panels that all demanded and contained the same amount of time and attention. As page layouts and mise en page became more complex, the authors could draw attention to or make readers linger on particular panels specifically because of their different size,shape, or juxtaposition to those panels around it. A single large panel in the center of a page will naturally bring readers' attention to that panel instead of the first panel on the page. Similarly, by changing a nine panel grid page

[61] Chris Ware *Acme Novelty Library #19* (Montreal, Quebec: Drawn and Quarterly, 2008) p. 40

into a seven panel grid page and expanding the length of the middle panel, readers will take more time on that longer panel and experience time being drawn out.

By giving a panel a specific size and on the page and placing a male character's face or powers predominantly in that panel while juxtaposing that with an equally sized panel that only shows a female character's breasts or back side communicates something very specifically about the way gender is seen and presented. Similarly, if the mise en page provides panels that are all given equal prominence and only caucasian characters are seen fully in them while non-white characters are glimpsed only peripherally or segmented, the mis en page can be seen to be communicating a specific meaning about race and how readers are supposed to see the characters. *X-Men* Volume 2, Issue 4, gives a specific example of how analysis of the mise en page can help us see differences in representation.

On page 14, the reader is introduced to the main villains of the story.(Fig. 3)[62] Two men and one woman are all given similarly shaped and sized panels when they speak. Because two of the four panels are given over to the character Matsuo, readers can interpret that he is the more prominent and important character of the three, especially as the third panel in the series gives the reader a much closer and tighter look at his face. However, of the



Fig. 3 Matsuo, Adrea, and Andreas. *X-Men* Vol. 2 #4

[62] John Byrne (w) Jim Lee (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #4 (Marvel Comics, Jan 1992) p. 14

three characters, when the female character, Andrea, is presented in her panel, she is presented in a tight close up of her lips.

Here the mise en page works to communicate specific ideas of how the one woman in this scene should be seen in comparison to the men. By using their panel to show all of the male face, the male characters are seen as whole or complete, where Andrea is shown as primarily a fragmented part, a mere piece of herself that can communicate gender and sexual indicators. Not only does the mise en page transmit meaning through the size, shape, and placement of the panel, but in how the contents of the panel are arranged. The placement of protagonists, antagonists, heroes, and villains within a panel - as well as the type of panel - help readers to understand the characters' roles. Similarly, the way male and female characters are placed in panels transmit very specific paradigmatic choices in how male characters and female characters perform and are percieved.



Fig. 4 The Gotham City Sirens

In DC Comic's female led title, *Gotham City Sirens* mise en page shows a distinct difference in how even ancillary male characters are positioned in comparison to the three female protagonists. By looking at the opening splash page - a full page comprised of one panel where readers are introduce to the characters - from Issue #9, the positions of characters within the panel communicates specific ideas about how those characters should be read.(Fig. 4)[63]

[63] Paul Dini (w) Guillem March (a) *Gotham City Sirens* #9 (DC Comics, April 2010) p. 1

Of the three female leads, only one of their faces can be seen in a limiting 1/4 profile, while the secondary male character, The Riddler, is centered in the panel with his face and identity clearly presented. All three of the female leads are placed in the foreground of the panel, but only parts of them are visible and made dominant within the panel. Both Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn are presented through their posteriors. Ivy's is the most dominant, while Catwoman has her body turned sideways, the curve of her posterior and breasts occupy more space than her face. For a panel that occupies and dominates the entire mise en page of the opening page of the comic, it is privileged and dominant when juxtaposed against the much smaller panels that will follow throughout the entire issue. This works to inform old and new readers who these characters are and how they should be understood. This first, large, dominant panel overlays all the other panels and transfers meaning along the syntagmatic web to other smaller panels that contain these characters. How readers initially see the characters influences how they see the chraracters later. The Riddler is a person with a face, while the female leads are their primary, physical, sexual identifiers. This can be juxtaposed with the fact that throughout the whole rest of the issue, The Riddler is never placed within a panel that is just his crotch or his posterior. His face is prominent in all of the panels. Even when he is not the focus of the panel and is secondary to one of the female leads, his face is his indicator, while their sexual identifiers are their indicators. Later, when Ivy is talking, instead of presenting the reader with all of Ivy's face, placing that in the panel, her face is placed in the foreground, zoomed in to just her lips, focusing on physical indicators of gender, much the way she was presented in the opening splash page. This is how Andrea appears

and is presented to the reader almost two decades earlier.(Fig. 5)[64] Just like The Riddler's face is his identifier identified here, Matsuo and Andrea's brother, Andreas, are presented through a similar paradigmatic choice. By looking at the juxtaposition of male and female characters within a single panel, or even how male and female characters are presented in identical panels, the mise en page communicates who characters are and how they should be understood by the reader. There is an obvious difference in how the reader is expected to see a female character - only her physical gendered identifiers - instead of a fully-formed an individual.



Fig. 5 The Riddle and Ivy's lips.
Gotham City Sirens #9

Restricted Arthrology & Closure

The second form of arthrology is the sequential linear relationship between panels, or restricted arthrology. This form of arthrology is somewhat synonymous with McCloud's original idea of closure. However, where McCloud's idea of closure primarily looks at the creation of movement between panels, restricted arthrology is focused on the creation of linear narration and meaning along the signifying chain that manages spatial and temporal transitions. For the purposes of my own analysis, I will use the term closure to mean both the creation of movement and the meaning that is created through transitions between panels. According to McCloud, the act of closure occurs in the space between panels, called the gutter. In moving from one panel to the other, the active reader

[64] ibib p. 10

fills in the gutter with their own experiences and understanding.[65] Because of this, the comic narrative is partially dependent on what the audience project into the gutters.[66] To best illustrate how closure works, I will use McClouds "Peek-A-Boo" and "Ax Murder" examples.



Fig. 6 The Peek-a-Boo game. *Understanding Comics*

In Figure 6, between the first panel and the second panel, the reader must fill in or imagine the movement that occurs from the woman having her face uncovered to being covered. The reader does not see this action, nor is there any graphic representation of this movement.[67] However, because of the readers' experiences, knowledge of their own body movements, and observations of the movements of people around them, they are able to infer what movement occurred between the first and second panel and the reverse movement between panel two and three.[68] Where figure one helps us see how movement is created, Figure 7 illustrates how meaning and interpretation are created. In the two panels, instead of being shown an action to action transition like in Figure 7, readers are instead shown a subject-to-subject transition (while there are different view points, both panels are about the same scene or idea).[69] In the first panel



Fig. 7 Ax Murderer. *Understanding Comics*

[65] McCloud op cit pp. 67-9

[66] Carrier op cit p. 92

[67] McCloud op cit pp. 110-4 To help create the idea and illusion of movement within the panel itself, many artists have incorporated graphic elements such as motion lines, streaking or blurring effects, and subjective motion, all to varying degrees of success.

[68] ibib pp. 34-6

[69] ibib p. 71

readers see the ax-wielding individual as he charges after his victim. In the second panel readers only see the city skyline and onomatopoeic representation of a scream. It is up to the reader to create meaning between the panels. The meaning and implication derived from this closure is that the ax has fallen and the person running away from the ax-wielder has been killed or injured. All of that meaning and implication though is put together by the reader with the help of the panel placement and structure. Later in the narrative that meaning may be changed or be subverted, but relying on the two panels that readers are given, readers construct a particular meaning, which is the next narrative step between these panels via closure.

Through closure, the author, with the help of the audience, creates a simulation of time, motion, and transition. As previously stated, when comics function properly, the author allows for closure to trigger and the audience is able to connect the narrative together seamlessly. As Groensteen says , "The story is possibly full of holes, but it projects me into a world that is portrayed as consistent, and...allows me to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration."[70] The panels themselves can be physically isolated from other panels by their frames and gutters, and observed as single objects, but when the separate panels are sutured together through closure, a narrative structure is formed and meaning is created.

When working properly , closure creates both movement and meaning from panel to panel along both linear and non-linear structures. In Matt Fraction and David Aja's *Hawkeye*,#11 both linear and non-linear closure are required to obtain any meaning from

---

[70] Groensteen op cit p. 11

the issue. Completely told from the point of view of the hero Clint Barton's dog, text as a narrative tool is completely removed from the issue and instead, all meaning is constructed through closure.[71] After leaving Barton's apartment, Pizza Dog is shown traveling down a hallway in the apartment building.(Fig. 8)[72] While many of the panels look similar, the contents of each panel change subtly. The letters marking the apartments and the bubbles that appear above each door let the reader know that Pizza Dog is not stationary and is moving past each apartment in succession. While there are no movement lines until the final two inset panels of the page, closure lets the reader understand that movement is occurring and transmits meaning about the occupants in each apartment. In this case, closure occurres from panel to panel and through the bubbles above each door. This communicates how Pizza Dog perceives the occupants behind each door, and hints that he is searching for something. Closure allows the reader to create the movement and meaning that led from one panel to the next, but even more meaning and understanding is created when readers connect these

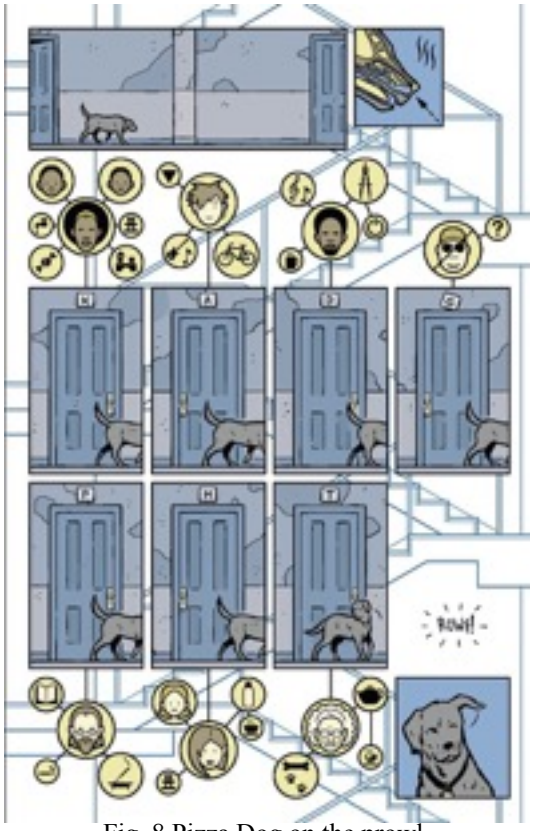


Fig. 8 Pizza Dog on the prowl. *Hawkeye* Vol. 2 #6

[71] Matt Fraction (w) and David Aja (a) *Hawkeye* Vol. 2 #11 (Marvel Comics, Aug 2013)

[72] ibib p. 2

panels and circles to panels in earlier issues of the series[73], which lets the reader know more about the inhabitants of the building. Readers can also understand what the different symbols around them may represent, giving deeper meaning to the movement and actions already represented on the page. While decoding meaning through these distant panels is a form of closure, Groensteen separates it in his spacio-topical system from closed arthrology.

Braiding

The final type of arthrology is the relationship of a panel to other spatially distant panels through similarity of form or content. This is what Groensteen calls tressage, or braiding. This form of arthrology is filled with a high level of encoding and becomes possible because an individual panel can be perceived simultaneously with other panels on the same page or in relation to panels that have appear at other points in the narrative. This is possible because the reader has access to multiple points of the syntagmatic web at the same time. Groensteen also argues that braiding can also communicate meaning by overlaying a narrative sequence with a "series", a continuous, or discontinuous, succession of images linked by a system of formal, iconic or semantic correspondences.[74] In Warren Ellis' *The Authority,* the Union Jack works as a formal element that has iconic correspondence throughout the book. Initially, Jenny Sparks wears a shirt emblazoned with the symbol as she and her team arrives as the only line of defense against super-powered global terrorists.[75] This corresponds later to the arrival of invading aliens from

---

[73] Matt Fraction (w) and David Aja (a) *Hawkeye* Vol. 2 #6, #7 (Marvel Comics, Feb - March 2013)

[74] Groensteen op cit p. 146

[75] Warren Ellis (w) and Brian Hitch (a) *The Authority Vol. 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2013) p. 74

an alternate dimension. These aliens wear an altered, blue Union Jack as the symbol of their imperial, genocidal, and rapist empire, Sliding Albion. (Fig. 9)[76] The repetition and braiding of this element can be used to express the idea that even a national symbol can become altered or perverted based on the individuals wearing them, a major theme through the book.



Fig. 9 Jenny Sparks and the Shifting Albion Blue Bloods. *The Authority*

Meanwhile, throughout the comic, other recurring motifs have semantic correspondences linked to the genre and theme of the comic though they are not necessarily strong iconic correspondences. Greimas refers to these themes as “isotopies”, or chains of elements, dispersed throughout a text, that have semantic features in common.[77] The formfitting spandex costumes, capes, and explosive and colorful superpowers are elements of superhero narratives. When these isotopies appear within a comic narrative, it gives clues to the reader about what genre they are reading and hints at ideas, themes, cliches, or rules that the reader may experience. This type of braiding creates meaning by relying on the expectations and experiences of the reader. Within

---

[76] ibib p. 139

[77] A.J. Greiman *Essais De Semiotique Poetique* (Paris, 1972) pp. 97-99

superhero comics, these isotopies can be dependent on readers' familiarity with the history of the medium and genre. This means correspondence and meaning can be created between and dependent on panels that exist far beyond just a single page of the comic going as far back as the beginning of a character's publication.

This form of braiding has become very popular in mainstream superhero comics and is strongly connected with continuity. Continuity within these comics is a long interwoven history between characters and franchises owned by, for example, Marvel and DC Comics. The universe of DC Comics is populated by characters, relationships, and events that stretch back almost a century. At times, these narratives require an encyclopedic knowledge to know how relationships between Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman have formed, changed, and created meaning and context for current narratives. For the purpose of superhero comic analysis, raccord can stand in for continuity, as these shared universes and relationships work as connecting devices for longtime fans of particular characters and franchises.

Raccord is the idea that comics and comic continuity function within their own time and that multiple different titles move within that time together. Even though a month may pass between the release of an issue of *Batman* and the next issue, the new issue can pick up seconds after the last issue ended. Similarly, the events of an issue of *Captain America* can be assumed to be occurring simultaneously with the events of an issue of *Black Widow* that was released weeks before or after. Raccord is time and continuity within a shared universe moves, shifts, and is rewritten simultaneously. This allows readers and long time fans to create a cohesive and trackable universal history.

This means that a particular panel can also be encoded through braiding with meaning that is created from its relation to a panel that was initially published in last months issue or a panel from an issue published 75 years ago. This pushes the boundaries and focal points of that particular syntagmatic web to obscure and forgotten moments to add meaning and depth to the shared universe.

An example of braiding and raccord working together is the original cover to *Action Comics* #1,which was published in 1938. The iconic image of Superman, holding a green car above his head, smashing the front end into a rock has been recreated on the covers and interiors of multiple other Superman comics. Issues of Supergirl, Superboy, Spider-Man and Avengers have all mocked, acknowledged, or signaled back to that original cover. (Fig. 10)[78] It is expected, that long time fans of the genre or series will understand the meanings of heroics, strength, and power from the original iconic image and transpose that meaning onto the newer version. Through closure and arthrology, panels can create meaning through relationships that



Fig. 10 *Action Comics* #1 braiding and raccord

[78] Jerry Siegel (w) and Joe Shuster (a) "Superman, Champion of the Oppressed" *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #1 (DC Comics: June 1938), Jon Goff (w) and Szymon Kudranski (a) *Spawn* #228 (Image Comics: February 2013), David Michelinie (w) and Todd McFarlane (a) *The Amazing Spider-Man* Vol.1 #306 (Marvel Comics: October 1988) Covers

exist on multiple planes at the same time. Even though they can be examined separately, they operate simultaneously when engaged by the reader.

It is important to note that while the different types of arthrology and closure can be seen working in different and individualistic ways, the most effective comic narratives and story-telling use all of them seamlessly and almost indistinguishably from each other. A series may communicate a more specific meaning when using restrained arthrology to bring that juxtoposition in closer contact. While an isotopie can be subverted, deconstructed, or reinforced with the help of mise en page and tressage, it is still dependent on understanding of the isotopie's original meaning. Though there may be disparate narrative tools and ways to communicate meaning, they most often function within a comic in unison, difficult to parse out their singular function from their function as a unified part of the narrative utterance.

Because of the potential complexity of the syntagmatic web and its reliance on connections and friction between panels, the panel becomes the priority point of analysis. Though the pieces of the panel (text, word balloons, color, drawings, etc) can be seen as individual syntagm, the panel holds the place of privilege as the primary point of analysis and narrative utterance. The panel is connected via the syntagmatic web to other panels preceding and following it, or to panels that exist chronologically, textually, and spatially through raccord, and arthrology. While it is possible to break the panel down to its individual pieces similar to the linguistic model, is not applicable here for two primary reasons. The first is that the image itself cannot be separated into units the way words or sentences can since the comic image is not made up of discontinuous elements. The word

balloons, thought bubbles, and text boxes can not be easily separated out from the image components of the panel. Those textual pieces in the panel do not simply narrate the actions in the panel; they add deeper context and meaning to the content of the panel. Secondly, unlike other signifier and signified relationships, the comic image is not an arbitrary relationship since it works by resemblance. Barthes points out that while a photograph may appear as a message without a code because it is reproduced mechanically, a drawing, or the panel, is assumed to be automatically encoded with the perceptions, representations, and styles of the creators.[79] This means that the panel is deeply encoded with meaning by their creators and by an editorial body.

The creators brought these panels into existence. The panels are directly influenced by the requirements of production (the monthly schedule, page size, direct market, etc.) and must appeal to the particular tastes of the perceived dominant reading position. Essentially, the meaning that is being created within many mainstream comics is constrained through a logonomic system. This system not only influences the meaning of the narrative, it influences the way that the panel is constructed, how the comic is consumed, and how discourse surrounding that comic is perceived. This logonomic system constrains meaning, and the paradigmatic choices creators have and make when constructing narrative. When Barthes uses semiotics as a framework for analyzing cultural signifying systems, he enters into the cultural significance of paradigms as they form more complexly encoded syntagm. This same form of cultural meaning comes into play when discussing the content of comics. Since content can be effected by the cultural

---

[79] Roland Barthes *Image, Music, Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) p. 43

influences and constraints of the logonomic system, panels, and therefore comics, can be deeply culturally encoded.

The comic image is especially complex in its encoding, since it fuses both image and text through a seamless relay. Not only do comics allow image and text to function in a complementary relationship, this relay means that the world created within comics can be analyzed in semiological terms. Since changes within the presented paradigm creates a significant change of cultural meaning, costumes, poses, proportions, and roles of characters, for example, are all encoded. Presenting a female character like Harley Quinn in a full body costume, only to redesign her so that she is wearing short-shorts and a half corset means Harley is more provocative and sexualized. These changes are the primary function of the logonomic system and the changes mean that a privileged reading position is reactivated within the comics field. This delivers a position of desired and expected meaning.

Chapter 3 - Logonomic Systems and Dominant Positions

To better understand the ideas of gender representation and how it is communicated, constructed, and constrained through the logonomic system within mainstream superhero comics, it is important to look at the perceived dominant reading position. It is also important to examine what the logonomic system is and how it maintains itself. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress describe a logonomic system as a social semiotic system that takes into account means of production, consumption, and audience to transmit and encode meaning within a text.[80] The logonomic system uses genre, production, and means of production, along with the culture and rituals that surround a medium, to constrained and deliver a specific and expected meaning to the perceived, dominant, reading position. In the case of main stream superhero comics, that perceived reading position is predominantly a hetero-male position. Though anecdotal evidence has generally pointed to an audience for comics that is predominantly male and heterosexual, it would be ignorant for us to assume that women, gays, or lesbians do not read comics or the superhero genre. As Robert Hodge points out, there is not just one meaning in any given text; however, within specific genres and specialized mediums, there is often a constrained meaning, a meaning that needs to exist in order for the dominant reading position to decode an expected meaning or pleasure.[81] In order for us to examine a dominant meaning within superhero comics, the perceived dominant reading position and how it fits into the logonomic system that incorporates genre rules -isotopies

---

[80] Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress *Social Semiotics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) p. 4

[81] Robert Hodge *Literature as Discourse* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) p. 27

- and the production and consumption of comics must be identified. In looking at the idea of audience, Bourdieu states that in any given field (or what Hodge would call a domain), one particular group will strive for dominance or consecration so that their aesthetic constructions will negate opposing constructions. This causes the produced texts to reflect the dominant audience's expectations and desires.[82] Once a particular reading position has gained dominance within a field, to keep them as consumers of texts, those texts must represent and take forms that reflect the dominant positions interests and the interests of their power[83]. It is the producers of texts who then need to deliver that desired representation and meaning: "Those who control modes of production can promise to deliver a familiar set of meanings to groups of readers. Because of the power of this promise, they can then exert control over the production of those authors"[84]. While the authors of superhero comics may have different interests than the dominant reading position, the logonomic system works to constrain particular meanings, assuring that the dominant reading position receives at least a fragment of the expected meaning and pleasure.[85] However, to fully understand how the logonomic system works in superhero comics, the dominant reading position, or the perceived group of readers that is being delivered a familiar set of meanings must be idenitfied. The best way to determine this is

---

[82] Pierre Bourdieu *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* Trans Randal Johnson (New York: ColumbiaUP, 1993) p. 55-6

[83] Hodge and Kress op cit p. 3

[84] Hodge op cit. p. 22

[85] ibid p 49

to look at who the producers of superhero comics, specifically Marvel and DC Comics, see as the reader s for whom they are creating comics.

The Comics Code

Before the near collapse of the the American comics industry in the early to mid-50s, the comic medium was one of the largest and most widely consumed mediums around. Genres varied from crime to superhero, horror, comedy, romance, westerns, war stories, and more. The readership during this comics hey-day was also very wide and diverse, with as many young girls reading and collecting comics and young boys. However, due to public outcry against and the criticisms of comics leveled against the industry by Dr. Fredric Wertham and the US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, the American comic industry, in an attempt to save themselves, constructed and introduced a self-regulating "Comics Code Authority," which is very similar to the Hays Code used by the motion picture industry at the time[86] The Comics Code gave very specific moral instruction and guides on the content of comics. Along with instructions and regulations on subject matter like violence, sex, and sexuality, comic creators were specifically told, "Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities"[87]. Scantily-clad, busty women had previously been present on the covers of everything from horror to superhero comics. With the adoption of the code, many female characters simple vanished from comics. "Batman's sexy foe Catwoman was deemed too racy for the new world of the comics Code (sic). She was gone by

---

[86] David Hajdu *The Ten-Cent Plague* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008) p. 375

[87] ibid p. 376

1955."[88] Comics companies like DC Comics made the decision that if they could not present sexy, objectified women, they would not bother with trying to include them at all. DC's official editorial policy even reflected this: "The inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged. Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance"[89]. Unless they could be titillating or motherly, female characters were useless to publishers. The potential roles and performances of female characters were sexual objects, wives, or mothers. The codes insistence that "sacred" institutions such as marriage should always be respected meant that mothers and housewives needed to replace the female adventurers and flirts that were present in pre-code comics.[90] While career women existed, particularly in the romance comics published by Marvel at the time, they were in gender appropriate, male supporting roles. Even comic headlining Wonder Woman was relegated to being the secretary of the Justice Society of America.[91] As Marvel followed DC's publishing practices and jettisoned most of their romance and monster comics to start publishing predominantly superheroes, their female characters began supporting men. In comics, few women were written who wanted to transcend their gendered performance.[92] Not only did the comics code work to police content, it also functioned to promote conservative gender roles and representations. This meant

---

[88] Mike Madrid *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Ashland: Exterminating Angel, 2009) p. 58

[89] ibid p.77

[90] Hajdu op cit p. 392

[91] Madrid op cit p. 49

[92] ibid p. 106

constraining and providing only conservative or “wholesome depictions of women” for comic readers.[93]

Before the code, the popular romance comics of the time presented a large range of female representation, quite often transgressive and subversive to expectations of gender performances in the 40s and 50s. In post-World War II America, the women who had been enlisted in factories and offices to fill the gap left by the men sent overseas, we're told to get back into the kitchen and marry a GI. “Women were forced out of careers they had had, and back into the home, because the soldiers were coming back and they wanted their jobs back.”[94] This dictum though was not embraced by all the women who had found freedom and autonomy in their war-era work. During the boom of the romance comics, many of the most popular titles were being written and drawn by women. While their stories did work to meet expectations of a large male audience by "featuring women characters who just loved to chat about their love lives while they dressed and undressed.”[95] Many of the the pre-code romance comics presented female characters in willful defiance and rebellion against adults and males. These female characters chased boys, longed for more than the role of house wife, and all around scoffed at the expected gender performances of young women in the late 40s and early 50s.[96] However, with the introduction and enforcement of the comics code, the potential roles and representations of female characters were heavily constrained. Since the code

---

[93] ibid p. 29

[94] Louise Simonson *Secret Origin: The Story of DC Comics* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010)

[95] Hajdu op cit p. 194

[96] ibid p. 198

and its enforcers insisted that comics must “emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage,”[97] many of the female characters appearing in comics were banished. From a titillating and objectifying view point, one artist complained “I had to make all the breasts smaller, and the jungle girls were always flying through the air on vines, and now they had to have skirts on, and the skirts could never go up.”[98] At the same time, female writers such as Dana Dutch exited the comic industry because they, “could no longer write stories of young women challenging their parents, boyfriends, and other social conventions of the day.”[99] Where one of Dutch's pre-code female protagonists had asserted, "We girls should demand equal rights with boys. Isn't this a free country? Why shouldn't we be allowed to do everything boys do?”(Fig 11)[100]



Fig. 11 Daring to take make the first move. “I Tempted the Wrong Boy”

After the code, these types of subversive thoughts were deemed too dangerous and inappropriate for the youth of America.

To survive in the post-code world meant expunging anything that was morally or socially problematic within the code’s regulations. As most comic companies began to go

---

[97] ibid p. 392

[98] ibid p. 395

[99] ibid p. 198

[100] Dana Dutch (w) and Matt Baker (a) “I Tempted the Wrong Boy” *Pictorial Romance* #7 (St. John, May 1951) p. 13

broke and vanish, DC Comics and Marvel Comics (previously known as Timely) sprang back to life on the shoulders of their reimagined superhero comics that stuck strictly to code guidelines. Gone were the large-breasted pinups and jungle girls, as were the rebellious and business-oriented women. While the pinups eventually returned, the independent women of the romance comics were permanently missing from the Big Twos' new publishing directives.

Even though both Marvel and DC have abandoned the Comics Code,[101] its effects on cultural representations are still prevalent. Because DC and Marvel rely so much on their massive continuity and publication history, many of the character origins and definitions are rooted in a time when the Comics Code dictated the type of representations that were allowed. Because these shared universe continuities are so dogmatically important to the dominant reading position and comic fan-culture, to reshape, retcon, or undo foundational aspects of characters is a process that can come across as heretical.

The Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, or Punisher that the dominant reading position expects is based on versions of those characters that were codified during the Silver age of comics; a time period approved of by the Comics Code. Even though the code no longer dictates roles along gender, sexual, or racial lines, those constraints have become interwoven into the long-running characters' histories and mythos. Today, changing a character's gender, sexuality, or race often causes major backlash from both fan-culture and the dominant reading position. Today, a new Ms. Marvel character can be

---

[101] As of 2010, the Comics Code Authority ceased to exist. It shuttered its doors after the last publisher, Archie Comics, decided it would no longer be submitting its comics for approval.

created as a young, Palestinian, Muslim, girl is acceptable, but to have retconned or altered the old Ms. Marvel's ethnic or racial background would have been unthinkable and heretical to the doxa[102] of Ms. Marvel. Turning Spider-Man or The Flash into black characters, Green Lantern into a gay man, or Thor into a woman has been met with major disapproval from fans who could be said to occupy the dominant reading position. What this reading position expects is not just the Silver Age versions of their characters, but also the same power structures of dominant men and dominated women. They also desire the gendered performances that have been construed as integral aspects to defining superhero comics.

The move by DC and Marvel to adhere to the Comic Code's submission guidelines meant that they were required to limit and further constrain female roles. Any representations that could be seen as subversive or socially progressive were quickly removed or considered unviable. Submitting to the code illustrates a specific move in production, audience, and meaning. By constraining, removing, and limiting the representation of women in their comics, the Big Two actively began to direct their narratives and messages at, and to reflect, a male experience and a male reading position.

Though the superhero world being portrayed in comics at the time was different from the real world of the reading position, the decision to completely eliminate, or at least minimize, and constrain, the role women played in narratives signifies a specific structure of how the message of gender relations and male/female relationships is reflected to the real world. The narrative message is connected to a world to which it

---

[102] In this case, doxa is the agreed upon, official, and canonical way that a character should be understood or interpreted.

refers in some way, and its meaning derives from the representative or mimetic function it performs.[103] So, while women may have continued to read comics in the 50s and beyond, the messages and representations that were being produced within the comics themselves were becoming constrained to reflect a dominant male reading position, privileging male experience over female experience and limiting the potential for diversity within representation of women.

The Dominant Reading Position

The way individual authors and producers perceive the reading position they are writing for further illustrates the argument that the dominant reading position for superhero comics is a male reading position. "Writers write for some kind of readership whose presumed interests as real readers affect that reading."[104] The way authors and writers see their potential readership and their interests is a part of the logonomic system that constrains meaning and determines ideological effects. Within superhero comics, that potential readership is viewed as decidedly male. The only thing needed to illustrate this is to look at the comments put forward by mainstream publishers and authors and the information that has led to their perception of their audience.

In an interview with the New York Times, DC Comics co-publisher Dan DiDio stressed that with mainstream publishers, the goal was to "reach the biggest audience possible and be as successful as possible."[105] In the world of comics though, fan

---

[103] Hodge and Kress op cit. p. 5

[104] Hodge op cit. p. 48

[105] Dave Itzkof "Comics' Mother of the 'Weird Stuff' is Moving On." *The New York Times* (29 May. 2013.) p. 2

acceptance and publishing success are two concepts that are directly tied together to dictate how longtime fans of comics spend their money. The means of comic consumption has, for years, been relegated and focused towards specialty shops and comic fan-culture: popularity at the comic shop translates specifically to publishing success. The direct market, through comic book stores in particular, have become an almost exclusive way for comic publishers to reach any audience and for that audience to find and purchase comics. The success and continued publication of titles is dictated by sales figures tracked by Diamond's exclusive distribution network to comic and specialty shops. For DiDio's philosophy, this means that to be successful at publishing, publishers need to reach the largest number of readers going in and out of comic shops. Before the availability of digital comics and e-readers as a method of obtaining comics, the comic and specialty shop was the privileged sight of reception and consumption as part of the logonomic system of superhero comics.

Just two years before this interview, DC Comics attempted to find out more about the audience that they were trying to target. In 2011, DC Comics hired the survey company Nielsen to go to comic shops and survey readers about their "New 52"[106] publishing initiative and the audience's purchasing habits. The results from their surveys showed that 93% of respondents were men.[107] These findings mirrored a study from the

---

[106] The New 52 was a major publishing event where all of DC Comics' past continuity was erased and a new one was constructed with a lunch of all new #1 issues

[107] Heidi MacDonald "DC's Rood Breaks Down Reader Survey." (PublishersWeekly.com. 14 Feb. 2012.) <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/50633-dc-s-rood-breaks-down-reader-survey.html>

late 90s that put the male readership of comics at 91.5%.[108] DiDio's comments and two survey statistics illustrate that the audience purchasing comics is overwhelmingly male. This research only serves to reinforce a perception of a dominant male reading position. Brett Schenker, a notable market and media researcher, has used social media marketing techniques and stated that his research points to a much closer 40 - 60 split of female to male readership.[109] Part of this discrepancy in research is that the Nielsen survey was conducted almost exclusively at comic shops, while Schenker's research targeted users across social media platforms. Along with the stereotype of the comic reader as male, the image of the comic shop is also reminiscent of a boys only clubhouse. The weekly pilgrimage to the comic shop, the central source for comics and fan interaction, has become part of the performance of appropriate comic reading and consumption. The perception of the comic shop as male only has become so prominent that websites and groups have popped up on the internet to help female readers identify and locate safe or inviting comic shops.[110] One group, the LCS Valkyries,[111] is a group of women who work at comic shops and who simply, "[w]ant to give female fans a comic shop experience that, at the very least, isn't scary and insulting"[112] The comic shop has traditionally been a space specifically for a male readership and fandom if these groups and reactions are any

---

[108] Keith Murphy and Jonathan Tankel. "Collecting Comic Books: A Study of the Fan and Curatorial Consumption." *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*. Ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1998) p. 60

[109] Brett Schenker "Facebook Fandom Spotlight: Who are the Comic Fans?" (Graphic Policy, 1 Sept. 2013.) <http://graphicpolicy.com/2013/09/01/facebppl-fandom-spotlight-who-are-comic-fans-912013>

[110] "Beware the Valkyries" <http://bewarethevalkyries.tumblr.com>

[111] LCS being the abbreviation for Local Comic Shop

[112] "Beware the Valkyries" op cit

indication. Their figures simply reinforced the longstanding stereotype of the comic readership and comic shop customer as a predominantly male group, one that the logonomic system works to deliver meaning to. Despite any evidence that may point to a growing female readership or the possibility of a female reading position, because of decades of repetition, there is a direct connection between the genre itself and an inherent maleness in the way the genre works and communicates meaning.

In an interview in 2010, former DC Comics president Paul Levitz proclaimed, "I'm not sure young woman are as interested in reading about superheroes."[113] This sentiment was reiterated in 2013 when comic creators Todd McFarlane, co-founder of Image Comics, Len Wein, co-creator of Wolverine, and Gerry Conway, co-creator of The Punisher, collectively said in an interview that superhero comics were a male genre, testosterone-fueled guy stories, and that it is never an appropriate venue for telling stories that women would want to read.[114] The logonomic system communicates a gender-specific act of comics consumption: these men assert that reading comics, specifically superhero comics, is not an aesthetic choice and is biologically determined.

Why take a female reading position into consideration if the perception of the genre is that females do not read it? This perception of the genre they are creating and those who read the comics gives a clear indication of the dominant authorship and audience. Not only does this attitude define the dominant reading position, it also gives

---

[113] Nathan Wilson. "Paul Levits Talks About 75 Years of DC Comics." *The Comics Journal* (10 Dec. 2010.) <http://classic.tcj.com/interviews/paul-levitz-talks-about-75-years-of-dc-comics-part-3-of-3/>

[114] David Hinkley. "PBS Announces 'Superheroes: The Never Ending Battle' as Comic Books Continue to Take over the World." *New York Daily News*. (8 Aug. 2013.) <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/pbs-announces-superheroes-ending-battle-article-1.1420911>

an indication of the perception of gender in relation to superhero comics. For publishers and consumers, there is a specific view of genders placed in a patriarchal power structure. This power structure, the privileging of male experience over female experience, and expectation how females should behave, illustrates how meaning is constrained and transmitted through the logonomic system. These issues also inform the way performance and gender roles is reflected socially within comics consumption and discourse.

The ideology and message of male dominance and patriarchy are transmitted across the logonomic system and can be seen as part of the action required to consume and construct meaning out of comics. The logonomic system within these superhero narratives, and the meaning they transmit, are not exclusively rules that operate within the narratives themselves, but have "an imaginary relation to real conditions of existence."[115] This transmits the message that patriarchy within the comic is how the world outside the comic should operate.

The encoded message transmits a mimetic meaning that reflects patriarchal power structures with men in the dominant roles. The characters that appeared in comics represented a large diversity of male experience, while female experience was constrained, minimized, and closely regulated. Appearances of males to females within superhero comics shoes that "only 29 percent of DC's [characters] are female and a

---

[115] Louis Althusser and Ben Brewster. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 2001) p. 174

similar 31.1 percent of Marvel's crowd."[116] The fact that so few women are represented in comics and that their representation is constrained presents to the readers a world of power that is overwhelmingly dominated by men. While female characters do exist, their representation is constrained and limited to expectations of patriarchal power both inside and outside the comic. Where male experience is limitless, female experience is limited and reflective of male experience. The logonomic system that targets a dominant male audience has "an overall structure consisting of general rules (expressing the dominance of the dominant) plus alternatives or exceptions (acknowledging through circumscribing the opposition of the subordinated)."[117] For every Superman and Batman, there is a Wonder Woman. For every Captain America and Iron Man, there is a Black Widow. However, these single exceptions to the large number of male characters only serves to mark them as the opposition and reaffirm the idea of male experience as primary and vast while female experience is secondary and limited.

With such an overwhelming number of male lead titles being published and female characters so significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts, maleness, and the representations of male experience has become the default position within comics. Women and femaleness, at least the way the iconic and mimetic representations of them are created in comics, is the marked exception. In order for patriarchal ideology and a reinforcement of male dominant power structures to be most effectively communicated through the text, the dominant position needs to be less visible within the narrative. With

---

[116] Walt Hickey "Comic Books Are Still Made By Men, For Men And About Men." (FiveThirtyEight.com: 13 Oct. 2014.) < http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/women-in-comic-books/>

[117] Hodge and Kress op cit. p. 5

maleness as the default and expected position, maleness becomes invisible, and "ideological effect is stronger for the absence or invisibility of the agent."[118] By leaving maleness unmarked, or making it the primary point of view, the patriarchy as a dominant position within the narrative does not need to be so explicitly represented. Since there is an expectation for the reader to adopt that position to most effectively receive meaning within the comic, the male position becomes invisible.

For the dominant male reading position, this transposition - or slipping into a male centric view- is simple since it is the reading position that meaning is being constructed for. But for other gendered reading positions, there is a certain level of active transposition. As has already been discussed, the act of reading comics requires a lot of the reader to construct movement, narrative, and meaning. The need for the reader to be active in the creation of narrative movement means that any reading position becomes somewhat complicit in constructing the ideology and meaning of the comic text. The relationship between author and audience requires the author's signals for closure and arthrology to be understood by the reader in order for the intended narrative and meaning to be constructed.

While these transitions can be ambiguous and interpreted differently by different reading positions, it is part of the process of creation to eliminate ambiguity in closure and arthrology. Carrier points out that those transition clues need to be clear; if they are too ambiguous, the author has failed.[119] Through repetition and by removing ambiguity,

---

[118] Hodge and Kress op cit. p. 60

[119] Carrier op cit. p. 14

the meaning constructed by the active reader through closure and arthrology fits a specific meaning. This makes the reader, in part, the source of that meaning, further obscuring the true agent and source of the meaning. McCloud says the act of closure is a call and response from author to reader.[120] This idea of the author calling in a particular way is similar to Althusser's idea of interpellation, a summoning by ideology, hailing the reader.[121] The author hails the readers through panels, assuming that they will construct the narrative in a prescribed way. The author also assumes the readers will accept and help construct the ideology and meaning expected by the dominant reading position. By answering the interpellation, readers establish a semiotic relationship with the ideology as they interpret signifiers, signifieds, and signs in a specific and constrained way. This reinforces the structure of dominant and dominated that keeps the already dominant reading position in power. Within superhero comics, this means the reinforcing of patriarchal power structures and giving the dominant male reading position its expected meaning and pleasure. Not only does the logonomic system use the way comics are constructed, produced, and then consumed to construct meaning, it also uses expectations of the superhero genre's tropes and rules to further constrain meaning and representation.

Over the last 75 plus years of publication and with the help of the direct market system, the superhero genre has become the dominant genre within the comics medium. The genre is so dominant that many individuals feel that comics are synonymous with superheroes. The genre, primarily through the big two publishers of DC Comics and

---

[120] Scott McCloud "Scott McCloud on Comics" TED video, 17:06, Filmed February 2005, Posted June 2009, <http://www.ted.com/talks/scott_mccloud_on_comics.html>

[121] Althusser and Brewster op cit. p. 174

Marvel Comics,[122] accounts for at least 68% of the comics market share.[123] As a genre filled with rules and tropes, the publishers are particularly effective when they deliver a specific meaning and ideology. "Genre rules are exemplary instances of logonomic systems, and are a major vehicle for their operation and transmission."[124] Over time, and through massive redundancy, the tropes and rules of the superhero genre have become part of the logonomic system. They are used to reiterate and deliver a specific, constrained meaning to a dominant reading position. These rules eventually become built in modality values, expectations of, and definers of the genre itself. Because they are perceived as necessary staples of the genre, they become more potent because they are unconscious and invisible as they determine ideological effects.[125]

Through the interplay of communication along the logonomic system between producer and consumer, the genre becomes encoded with particular rules that signifies a specific structure of dominant and dominated relations. This logonomic system and encoding of male dominant meaning has not only become a definer of the perceived male reading position but also a perception of maleness as a dominant trait of comic consumption, production, and culture within the comic domain. This maleness has started to permeate the way comics are discussed, where they are consumed, and who is allowed

---

[122] Both DC and Marvel publish almost exclusively superhero comics, committing almost all of their publishing efforts to comics that are interlocked through a shared universe that their superheroes inhabit.

[123] Rich Johnston "DC Comics Smashes Marvel on Marketshare in September but Wolverine's Death Tops the Chart" *Bleedingcool* (3 Oct. 2014) < http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/10/03/dc-comics-smashes-marvel-on-marketshare-in-september-but-wolverines-death-tops-the-chart/>

[124] Hodge and Kress op cit. p. 5

[125] Hodge op cit. p. 39

to critique and discuss comics. Representation and discourse are effected when one gender controls production and consumption. This discourse, having become imbedded with a decidedly male component and way of seeing, dictates that all components of the logonomic system should function with a focus and understanding of a one-gender experience.

Comics Discourse

Foucault's theory of discourse has been defined as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices" and that "they constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern"[126]. Within comics discourse, this translates into not only understanding the complex canonical histories of characters and fictional universes - the constituted knowledge of the field - but also that aesthetic judgments, means of consumption, expectations of production, and a particular gendered power structure are universal in the culture and the narratives. It also implies these things are necessary for seeking to govern the medium and distinguishing those allowed to take part in the discourse.

As male-dominant reading positions and narratives are being constructed, maleness becomes a defining trait required of the culture and for a person to participate in the discourse of comics. For a woman to attempt to engage in the discourse or fandom of comics, or even to go so far as to critique superhero narratives, is seen as an outside force or agent trying to decentralize the power of the dominant position. Looking back at

---

[126] Chris Weedon *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Pub., 1997) p. 108

Bourdieu's theories on audience helps shed light on this issue: if the audience begins to see itself as male, then the female reader or audience is seen in opposition or possible points of resistance to their already constituted aesthetic constructions. The female reading position or the female in the comic shop has become an anomaly or transgression to the discourse. Since reading comics is perceived as a male-centric activity, the woman in the comic shop or reading comics is either reading comics incorrectly or performing womanhood incorrectly.[127] The female reader or fan, engaging in the male dominant comic discourse, is perceived as an enemy agent; she isattempting to alter the domain and decentralize the dominant position's power. These enemy agents become sources of anxiety and are reacted to as such.

When former DC Comics editor turned comic critic Janelle Asselin wrote a piece criticizing the sexualization of a 16 year-old Wonder Girl on the cover of *Teen Titans*,[128] her critique was met with not only derision, but also with threats of violence and rape. The overwhelming response was that Asselin did not understand comics, that she had probably never really read comics, and that she was "a fake geek girl."[129] Even though she was a vital and active part in the production of the comics she talks about, her femaleness marks her as other, an enemy agent who is not allowed to engage in the discourse of comics. Her femaleness denotes that the meaning of the comics is not

---

[127] Douglas Wolk *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2007) p. 70

[128] Janelle Asselin "Anatomy of a Bad Cover: DC's New 'Teen Titans' #1" (Comic Book Resources. 11 April 2014) < http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=52103>

[129] Janelle Asselin "Let's Talk About How Some Men Talk to Women in Comics" <http://gimpnelly.tumblr.com/post/82704464182/lets-talk-about-how-some-men-talk-to-women-in>

intended for her and that she is not capable of properly decoding the meaning of the image of Wonder Girl that was being presented on the cover of the comic.

This perception of the culture and prevalence of its discourse is so prominent that publishers and creators see only the male reading position and dismiss any possibility that women could be part of the superhero culture or audience. With a male reading position as the dominate force influencing production, consumption, and the transmission of meaning across the logonomic system, superhero comics have come to reinforce a privileging of the male experience while delivering a meaning that can most easily be decoded by heterosexual white men. For readers to derive a complete understanding in many superhero comics, they have to have become part of the comic discourse and subscribe to the discourse's gendered power structures. Being allowed to engage in this particular discourse means that their particular habitus and its gendered connotations make them the comic's ideal readers or viewers. As Stuart Hall puts it, they have accepted the dominant hegemonic position and they are decoding the preferred meanings from the text.[130]

If engaging in comics discourse, or inhabiting the dominant position, is predicated on a certain maleness, then the ideal viewers are also male. This privileging allows for male power to define and objectify and leaves women to be subjugated and objectified. Women are placed in panels to be observed for their femaleness; they are stylized and sexualized based on the expected desires of the male reading position. The panel, as the primary narrative platform of the medium, allows this objectification to be

---

[130] Stuart Hall. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. (Birmingham England: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973.) p. 136

frozen in that objectifying moment. Dr. Jose Alaniz posits that the visual image, held by the panel, intensely telescopes its gaze onto the physical markers of femininity and holds the segmented and fetishized body.[131] The expectation is that this is what the panel will contain and that is how they should be viewed. This expectation leads to the panels being created and coded with that expectation in mind. As already stated, Barthes asserts that images are encoded with the perceptions, representations, styles, and goals of the artist and creators.[132] Though, as Hall has suggested, that encoding of the text is determined by how the dominant reading position will then decode those images.[133] The logonomic system works to control the ideology and meaning that is being encoded and then decoded in a specific and expected way.

The Discrete Genders

With the male experience dominant, male characters and their experiences are equally privileged. Judith Butler points out that part of the maintenance of these privileging cultures and systems requires "the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances…and dispositions."[134]. Within superhero comics, the sexes are presented along obvious and visible binaries that are clearly constructed along gendered lines.[135] Not only must there be male and female within the world of the comics, they

---

[131] Dr. Jose Alaniz "Monstrosity, Disability, Visuality in Comics" (Keynote presentation at University of Florida Comic Conference, Gainesville, Florida, April 10 - 12, 2015)

[132] Barthes op cit p. 41

[133] Hall op cit p. 130

[134] Judith Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988) p. 524

[135] Aaron Taylor "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40.2 (2007) p. 345

must be easy to distinguish visually. “Discrete genders are part of what humanizes individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”[136] By constructing this binary system of male versus female within comics culture and narratives, it becomes important to maintain discreet genders within the texts themselves. This is done in order to ensure that the reader is able to quickly identify those who are dominant and those who are dominated. This need has driven the representations of male and female characters to extremes of iconic representation. The male body has become hyper masculinized with giant muscles, while the female body has become hyper-sexualized. This reiterates certain expectations of performance and roles for men and women within a patriarchal structure.

The dominant reading position expects to see the male and female characters in the narrative to be represented and to perform in a very specific way. These performances are dictated and hinted at through the construction of their gendered appearance. If those performances do not occur and if the expected meaning/pleasure is not transmitted along the logonomic system, the text and publisher can be punished by the dominant reading position. This punishment can often take the form of a book dropping in sales or being abandoned all together. As the artist and writer Howard Chaykin observed in the late 80s during the last big boom of superhero comics, "The comic book reader has very proscribed ideas about how comic book heroes behave."[137] By not meeting these proscribed ideas of behaviour or performance, producers run the

---

[136] Butler *Theater Journal* op cit p. 522

[137] Scott Bukatman *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke, 2003) p. 185

risk of losing economic capital as readers move to a comic that does provide the expected meaning and pleasure.

Because of the worry of the loss of economic capital, producers constrain artists and writers to maintain these gendered differences and performances. In giving advice to other artists about drawing women, artist Bart Sears advises them "not to draw them bloopy or dumpy, but at the same time if you draw them too hard and chiseled, they start to look masculine, which is definitely not good."[138] By making a female character look too masculine, they run the risk of losing the visual and easily identifiable markers of femininity. Or at least the perception constructed in the superhero genre of what a feminine body looks like. Without those markers, how the character should be seen and how they are expected to perform can be brought into question. The body, and even the costume that shapes the superpowered body, must transmit markers of gender.

In talking about the costume specifically, artist J. Scott Campbell has suggested that big and bulky costumes on female characters never looked good, but that "[e]verything about them is unfeminine and lacks style."[139] At all times, the female character, her body, and her costume need to communicate their feminine nature and must signal femininity before any other trait. If images of sexuality and gender become too ambiguous, they threaten to destabilize the system of identification. If gender were ambiguous, the assumed reading position would be unable to distinguish between

---

[138] Bart Sears "Brutes and Babes" *Wizard* 1.13 (1992) p. 38

[139] Rich Johnston "J. Scott Campbell and Wonder woman's New Shoulder Pads" *Bleeding Cool*. (15 Mar. 2015) <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2015/03/15/j-scott-campbell-and-wonder-womans-new-shoulder-pads/>

dominant and dominated, active and passive. Even the costumes that female characters wear are constructed to highlight these gendered bodies and the role of the female body within the narrative. According to the artist Cameron Stewart, "Overwhelmingly, the costumes for women in comics have been designed to get dude's attention. To let them know they are looking at a girl's body. Cleavage and ass means female, muscles mean male."[140] The body that is the mimetic representation of femaleness should be decidedly female and marked with easily identifiable biological indicators of femaleness. This makes them different than the male characters. The iconic representation within superhero comics, especially the female body, acts within the confines of the existing directives of the cultural discourse.[141]

These ways of presenting the female body are not new and have conformed to the expectations of the male dominant reading position. The female body has become inscribed with expectations and meaning, not only from comics discourse, but also as part of the way superhero comics are understood. The presentation of them physically, the powers they have, and the costumes they wear all come together to construct a recognizable identity. They are seen as an integral part of the superhero genre and they deliver a constrained meaning about the female role within a patriarchal structure.Much like Butler's ideas on gender performance, these representations of women must be repeated so that they become entrenched forms of representation.[142]

---

[140] Cameron Stewart (Writer and Artist) in discussion with the author, Nov. 2014

[141] Butler *Theater Journal* op cit p. 526

[142] Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 178

How Representation is Constrained

One of the simplest places to see the constraining of female representation in superhero comics is to look at the costumes that some of the female characters wear. In this case, the costumes of two non-super powered character's, DC Comic's Huntress, and Marvel Comic's Black Widow.(Fig. 12)[143]

Both of these character's fit into the trained super spy or martial artist group of heroes. Without powers, they instead rely on their training and fighting skills to stop crime. From outside of comic's discourse, their costumes can be seen as somewhat impractical. Huntress, like many female costumes, has a costume constructed to allow the female body and form to be seen. In this case, her costume is constructed with the large open window revealing her stomach. For a character without impervious skin and who sneaks around at night, a bare exposed stomach is both dangerous and impractical, giving any potential villains a clear and vulnerable target. Black Widow, while fully covered, is often presented with the zipper of



Fig. 12 Huntress and Black Widow. Bare midriff and unzipped.

[143] Gail Simone (w) and Rond Adrian (a) *Birds of Prey* Vol. 1 #69 (DC Comics: November 2004), Paul Cornell (w) and Tom Raney and John Paul Leon (a) *Black Widow: Deadly Origin* #2 (Marvel Comics: February 2010) Covers

her jumpsuit open, exposing her chest.[144] As with Huntress, Black Widow's costume leaves her dangerously exposed to possible villains, and in this particular image, seems unwise to be that uncovered to a Russian snow storm. However, as impractical and unwise as these costumes may seem to other reading positions, for the dominant reading position, this is how the female body has been and should be constructed, the exposed female body is how women are expected to perform their gender, visually, within the text. Again, the primary role of the female body is to be seen. To properly perform the female gender in superhero comics, the iconic way femaleness is represented, is to be uncovered and to be seen.

The importance of the visual and use of iconic imagery within superhero comics means that the appearance of characters and their costumes serves more than just the function of isotopy. Costumes and the body can also work to communicate ideas of identity through iconic solidarity. The iconic solidarity of the superhero costume and chest emblem, the Superman "S" shield or Batman's Bat symbol are probably the two most iconic and recognizable. Though the style of these may change over time, a recognizable logo has always maintained, representing the character wearing it.(Fig. 13)[145] These symbols, and the costumes they are worn on, become doxa within the comic fan discourse, permanent fixtures defining these characters.



Fig. 13 Evolution of Batman's insignia

[144] In extreme cases, her unzipped jumpsuit has been drawn open well below her belly button.

[145] Randy Krum "Evolution of the Batman Logo" *Cool Infographics*. (24 Dec. 2012) < http://www.coolinfographics.com/blog/2012/12/24/evolution-of-the-batman-logo.html>

Most often these iconic symbols are emblazoned across the chest of the character. However, the meaning of these iconic symbols and they way the are integrated into costume design and structure can be vastly different between male and female characters. The extreme of this is seen when comparing Superman and one of his female counter parts, Power Girl.

Power Girl is the name of a Silver Age, alternate earth version of Supergirl, Superman's cousin Kara Zor-L. From her original inception, she wore a form fitting white costume with a large hole or window -often referred to now as the boob or cleavage window - over her chest. In 1976, after finally being allowed full membership into the Justice Society of America, she is offered a chest emblem similar to her cousin's, but with a 'P' instead of an 'S'. As a display of independence and autonomy from her cousin, she destroys the offered insignia in a show of defiance.[146] While this initial act is one of opposition to patriarchy and male dominant power, the breasts left uncovered have grown larger and more prominent. Instead of being covered up, the hole in her costume has maintained and become part of the character's visual representation, the oval over her breasts becoming as symbolic as the "S" shield and iconic solidarity for how the character is drawn and recognized. For a male character like Superman, his symbol is drawn and presented to show strength, morale character, a symbol for what he stands for. For Power Girl, her symbol is presented to show her sexuality, markers of her femaleness, her symbol is literally a window for the male gaze to view her and to place

[146] Madrid op cit p. 146

her sexuality under constant male scrutiny.(Fig. 14)[147] Superman is allowed to define what the S stands for, primarily, based on his actions or personality. Power Girl, however, is not given the chance to negotiate how her icon defines her or how it is seen. Her actions and personality are secondary.



Fig. 14 Superman and his cousin Power Girl

Regardless of her actions, she is always seen first, sexually, as an exposed woman, hyper-sexualized, with idealized breasts on display. Her actions are secondary to how she can be objectified by the privileged gaze of the comic reader.

One argument that is often used against these types of critiques of the presentation of women in comics is that men are also stylized, presented hyper-masculine, and with idealized bodies.[148] However, this argument falls apart when we look at the privileging of the male gaze. For the male reader, men are presented as surrogates, points of reference to enter into the narrative. Female characters, however, are most often presented as objects to be seen, consumed, and fulfill the male sexual desire. “they reassure men of their sexual power and at the same moment deny any sexuality of women other than the male construct.”[149] The male reading position is presented with an idealized reflection of

---

[147] Brian Azzarello (w) and Jim Lee (a) *Superman* Vol. 2 #204 (DC Comics: June 2004), Justin Gray, Jimmy Palmiotti (w) and Amanda Conner (a) *Power Girl* Vol. 2 #2 (DC Comics: August 2009) Covers

[148] Hinkley op cit

[149] Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter. *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill*. (London: SAGE, 2005.) pp. 38-9

themselves in the male characters, and presented with an object of desire in the female characters. They are presented in order to heighten the awareness of gendered difference. If the women in many of these panels were replaced with men, the privileged gaze would find it transgressive to the discourse and their personal expectations.[150] It is, in fact, the body and the way the body is constructed, presented and seen that creates the most obvious differences between representations of men and women.

When the male body is presented in superhero comics, the idealized body of the character is meant to show power and strength. It is an active body, a body that the reader can connect with and see as a potential for themselves. The female body, however, is idealized to show sex, and to highlight their femaleness. The purpose of the male body is to become a reflection for the dominant reader, while the female body is meant to be seen. Again, looking back at the images of Superman and Power Girl, Superman's body is meant to show his powers - even the original costume design of Superman was meant to reflect the costumes of circus and carnival strong men[151] - Power Girl's body and costume is meant to highlight her female difference. This difference can also be observed when we look at the transformed bodies of The Hulk and his cousin She-Hulk.

When the skinny and nebbish scientist Bruce Banner was exposed to gamma radiation, he was turned into the monstrous green Hulk. When angered, Banner grows large and muscular. His skin turns green and he is able to destroy anything, especially villains, that stand in his way.[152] For Banner, his transformation gives him power and his

---

[150] John Berger *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin, 2008.) p. 46

[151] Paul Levitz *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Myth Making* (Koln: Taschen, 2010) pp. 52-7

[152] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a) *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (Marvel Comics: May 1962)

body is altered to highlight his strength. After offering an emergency blood transfusion to his cousin, Jennifer Walters, Bruce Banner also transfers some of his power. Like Banner, Jennifer transforms and her body is altered, but instead of changing into a large muscular beast, she is transformed into a more idealized woman[153]. Her waist becomes more trim, her breasts become more defined. Where Banner's new body comes to represent strength, Jennifer's new body comes to represent her femaleness and sexuality. Her large breasts and slim hips are constituted markers, visual indicators the dominant reading position recognizes and expects. They are also the markers used to identify which gender she is performing. Even though the two characters have very similar power sets - invulnerability, super strength - their bodies are presented differently.(Fig. 15)[154] For The Hulk, it presents his power, strength, and identity. For She-Hulk, it constrains her meaning and narrative possibility. Her body is inscribed with her singular and primary role within the patriarchal power structure that the logonomic system supports and communicates.



Fig. 15 Gamma powerful and gamma sexy. Hulk and She-Hulk

---

[153] Stan Lee (w) and John Buscema (a) *The Savage She-Hulk* #1 (Marvel Comics: February 1980) Cover

[154] Alan Davis (w)(a) *Savage Hulk* Vol. 1 #4 (Marvel Comics: September 2014), Dan Slott (w) and Juan Bobillo (a) *She-Hulk* Vol. 2 #1 (Marvel Comics: December 2005) Cover

Like her cousin, She-Hulk's transformations tore the clothes she was wearing. With The Hulk, this tearing of the clothes is part of The Hulk's iconic costume and reveals his strength, his muscles are just too powerful to be constrained by his shirt. For She-Hulk, it is stripping away her shyness, revealing her sexuality. Her new body, and by extension her costume, are too female to be hidden from the audience's gaze. The expectation of the gaze is that the hyper sexualized body will eventually be revealed to it, stripped bit by bit. The one absolute power that the female body, and by extension the female character, possesses is the power to be seen. In the world of superhero comics, a world that highlights the powers and abilities of characters, these powers have become intertwined with the gendered performances put on display.

As with the way their bodies are presented, the use of powers and abilities also presents a distinct difference between how male and female characters are displayed. While there is great variety in how men use and express their powers, women are frequently allowed to only use them in a sexually specific and visually suggestive way. As with the superhero body, the superhero abilities become inscribed with specifically gendered codes and performances. Even when the abilities and powers that the characters possess are virtually identical, use of these abilities by male gendered characters are presented as dominate actions that can be emulated or empathized with. In comparison, the abilities performed by female gendered characters tend to be presented as passive and overtly sexual so that they can be viewed and consumed. Batman and Catwoman are two characters where this difference can be seen clearly in regard to abilities that are not necessarily superhuman.

Neither Batman or Catwoman have superpowers, but they both share above human physical skills and training. In the comics, one skill that they are both often shown using, is subterfuge to infiltrate the villains organization, gain information, and an upper hand on their opponents. However, when these particular skills are used, there is a distinct difference in how they are presented to the audience. When trying to infiltrate criminal organizations, both Batman and Catwoman are required to use aliases and disguises. For Batman, this subterfuge is displayed through his disguise as Matches Malone, a low level gang enforcer.(Fig. 16)[155] He has also disguised himself as a homeless person or a police officer. Catwoman, however, has used the disguise of a bartender, prostitute, or mistress.(Fig.17)[156] While their use of disguise often works to great effect, allowing them to infiltrate and obtain the information that they need, the disguises they use and their abilities at subterfuge reflect a constrained way female characters are presented. Even when Catwoman chooses a disguise or alias that is not explicitly tied to the act of sex, the role and subterfuge eventually turns to the use of sex



Fig. 16 Batman as Matches Malone.


Fig. 17 Catwoman tending bar.

[155] Peter J. Tomasi (w) and Patrick Gleason (a) *Batman and Robin* Vol. 2 #25 (DC Comics: January 2014) p. 16

[156] Judd Winick (w) and Guillem March (a) *Catwoman* Vol. 4 #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) p. 11

and presents her body for the reader to be seen. Though her subterfuge may be as successful as Batman's, her skills are secondary, and in many ways dependent on her femaleness and her ability to present her sexuality through her abilities. Even in her canonical comic origins in Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One*, Catwoman's fighting skills were presented as a necessary part of her life as a prostitute in Gotham City.[157] As with She-Hulk's appearance, Catwoman's abilities are presented secondary to her sexuality. Her skills of subterfuge would not be effective if she did not use her body. She would not know how to fight if she did not need to prevent johns and pimps from beating her and the other prostitutes. Batman's abilities are primary. Even in 1940's *Batman* #1, the reader is informed that he, "Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats."[158] Batman's powers and abilities - and by extension his body - are about action and doing. In one act of subterfuge, Matches Malone lets himself get put into prison then fights his way out with the prisoner he needs to interrogate.[159] In one of her heists, Catwoman decides, "I'll be tending bar. And listening." she informs the reader, just after assuring them, "Not that I mind groping"[160]. Catwoman's powers and abilities are about being passive and highlighting her sexuality.

This is not to say that male characters never use sex or seduction within their power sets. As just two examples, the X-Man, Gambit, has the ability to seduce or charm other people with a subtle psychic force. Similarly the alien hero, Marvel Boy, has saliva

---

[157] Frank Miller (w) and David Mazzucchelli (a) *Batman: Year One* (New York: DC Comics, 2005) pp. 11, 63

[158] Bill Finger (w) and Bob Kane (a) *Batman* #1 (DC Comics [National Comics] Spring 1940) p. 2

[159] Tomasi (w) and Gleason (a) *Batman and Robin* op cit pp. 16-8

[160] Judd Winick (w) and Guillem March (a) *Catwoman* Vol. 4 #1 (DC Comics Nov. 2011) p. 8

that affects people in much the same way. Because of these traits, both Gambit and Marvel Boy are often presented as suave ladies' men, able to charm the girl, defeat the villains, then walk out of the fight with the girl swooning. Within superhero comics, however, this is just one option out of a large plethora of different male experiences and different ways that masculinity can be performed. With characters like Catwoman, Huntress, Black Widow, and She-Hulk, the variety of female experiences is limited, and overt sexuality has become a default way their gender is performed. Through repetitive reinforcement, women in comics are often left with only the options of, "the old, old moulds, in which women are wenches, bitches, or weepy blond recreation equipment."[161]. While the way female characters are drawn is a major aspect of the objectification and sexualization at work in superhero comics, the context of these images in the narrative and the actual text that accompanies them also help to reinforce these gendered performances, expectations, and constraints.

Since comics use a hybrid of picture and text to tell their stories, the context, histories, and roles that are associated with these female characters are also important factors in understanding the way women are expected to exist within comics. One tool that has become popular in assessing gender representation and the limited roles of women in comics - and in media at large - is known as the Bechdel Test. Originally presented by Alison Bechdel in her 1985 comic series, *Dykes to Watch Out For,* "The Rule" introduced a system by which gender roles and representations could be assessed in media.

---

[161] Susan Wood *The Poison Maiden and the Great Bitch* (San Bernardino: Borgo, 1989) p. 18

As the comic shows,(Fig. 18) the Bechdel Test has three basic rules. First, there must be at least two (named)[162] women; second, that those two women talk; and third, that they talk about something other than a man.[163] While these rules are originally designed and presented as a way to evaluate film, its application to comics seems fitting since Bechdel is best known for her work in the comics medium. While the test has gained more prominence, Bechdel herself has stated that the purpose of these rules were never to be an ultimate decision on the aesthetic quality of a narrative, but instead a simple way to draw attention to an imbalance she herself saw in media.[164] Of course, we would not assume that any comic that does not meet these three points is inherently flawed, or that passing this test



Fig. 18 Bechdel's "The Rule"

[162] While the women being named is not implicit in the original comic, it is something that Bechdel and others have since added to the test.

[163] Alison Bechdel. *Dykes to Watch Out For*. (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1986) p. 22

[164] Alison Bechdel "Testy." *Dykestowatchoutfor*. (8 Nov. 2013.) <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/testy>

is required to be considered a well-written comic. It should also be noted that just because a comic passes the test, does not imbue it with problematic free gender representations. While simplistic and limited, by looking at the core of the Bechdel Test, where the three rules that make up the test are rooted, it does provide us with a place to look at issues of gendered representation within the text, or written aspects of comics. Particularly, it provides a scope of context and roles that women have within the medium.

The first rule, that there be at least two women, is at its core a question of inclusion. From the outset, we already know statistically that superhero comics have far fewer female characters than male characters.[165] This gives a distorted view of the world outside comics, but does imply the idea of women not being present or necessary, while the women that are seen, are all the same. On a micro scale, a single issue of *Superman* or *Spider-Man* may illustrate a moment in the life of these heroes that may not necessarily involve a woman, let alone multiple women. In real life, the possibility of a person not interacting with any women throughout an extended amount of time, while improbable, is not impossible. As the title characters of their books, they are expected to be the primary focus. Similarly, a single issue of *Catwoman* may not involve any male characters. Issues of inclusion become problematic when the scope of comics, and the fictional universes they create, expand. With inclusion comes a diversity of female voices. If the only women that are seen in the pages of *Superman* month after month is Martha Kent or Lois Lane, the implication is that all women are either mothers or girlfriends that need saving. Similarly, if Wonder Woman is the only female superhero in the world of the Justice

---

[165] Hicky op cit

League, the diversity of female voices is relegated to a single type in comparison to the six diverse male voices represented in the team. By limiting the number of appearances of women, the diversity of female voices and experience are also limited. At its most basic, this impedes the ability for women to talk, which brings us to the second rule, the two women need to talk.

The second rule, more than just being able to talk, is about creating space that is not male dominated or controlled, separate from the heteronormative society they exist in. Even if we do have a larger diversity of voices represented, if they are not given a space to actually speak, it is still limiting the potential of those unique voices. The absence of space for marginalized groups to speak most often results in a type of silence. This implied community gives women a voice to express themselves, and as rule three demonstrates, express themselves not in relation to men.

Not only is the idea of male absent discussion at work in rule three, but also the idea that women's existence is not predicated on the existence and whim of male characters. Even if a diversity of women are included in the fictional narrative and are given a voice and a space to use that voice, that voice can still be filtered by the fact that they are dependent on a male character. By making the sole purpose of discussion and action for female characters the male characters, it reinforces the idea that men are of primary importance and that women should not be concerned with their own needs or interests, but those of the men they are connected to. What the three rules of the Bechdale Test provide is a foundation for assessing gender representation and to see if at the most basic level women are given a diversity of voices and if they are allowed to use those

voices Are they more than just plot points to help present the male story? And finally, are they just objects that can be consumed, destroyed, or replaced? As Virginia Woolf puts it in *A Room of One's Own*, the essay that promoted the idea for "The Rule",

> "All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple... And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends... They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that."[166]

Like the visual aspects of gendered performance within comics, the context, roles, and relationships that women have is based on expectations of the dominant reading position, inscribed through repetition, and rooted in perceptions of gendered difference that are transmitted through the logonomic system. Both Woolf and Bechdel point specifically to a limiting, and a repressing of female experience. This limiting is part of the function of the logonomic system in comics. It functions to constrain meaning and potential experience, delivering representations of women and female characters that fit into, and meet, the expectations of the dominant position. By making female experiences beholden to the privileged male experience, patriarchal authority is reasserted and the power dynamics between male and female experience is transmitted to the reader.

---

[166] Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) p. 78

When women in comics have no depth of character, besides their connection to male characters, it makes women less people, and more plot devices, making it easier for the reader to objectify them. When women are simply replaceable and interchangeable objects, they become what comic writer Kelley Sue DeConnick refers to as sexy lamps, "If you can replace your female character with a sexy lamp and the story still basically works, maybe you need another draft"[167] While primarily advice for fellow writers, DeConnick's advice stresses the fact that quite often in superhero comics, female characters are constrained and fall into a small handful of stereotypes. These women only serve the story in being something to look at and to motivate the active male characters in some way. This creates female characters that are completely objectified, only given value based on their connection to the male character or male reading position. This form of objectifying can best be seen in the, all too popular, Women in Refrigerators trope.

This trope is when a female character is presented, usually as a girlfriend, wife, or love interest, only to be kidnapped, tortured, raped, or murdered in order to motivate the male protagonist. Originally named and identified by comic writer Gail Simone,[168] the term gets its name from issue #54 of the 1994 *Green Lantern* story arc that introduced Kyle Rayner as the new Green Lantern of Earth. After the psychotic break of his predecessor, Kyle is chosen to become the new Green Lantern, a role that he accepts reluctantly and refuses to take seriously, despite the prompting of his girlfriend Alex. Only a few issue after meeting her, a villain arrives at Alex and Kyle's shared home

---

[167] Laura Hudson "Kelly Sue DeConnick on the Evolution of Carol Danvers into Captain Marvel" *Comics Alliance*. (19 Mar. 2012) <http://comicsalliance.com/kelly-sue-deconnick-captain-marvel/>

[168] Gail Simone "Women in Refrigerators." *Women in Refrigerators*. (Mar. 1999.) <http://www.lby3.com/wir/>

looking for the new Green Lantern. Finding only Alex, the villain beats, chokes, kills, and then folds up Alex's body, placing it in the refrigerator for Kyle to find on his return. Seeing his dead girlfriend is what angers Kyle and motivates him to take his role as Green Lantern more seriously, allowing him to defeat the villain.(Fig. 19)[169]



Fig. 19 Woman in refrigerator to motivate the hero.

While male characters have been killed or hurt to motivate other male characters, the role of disposable plot device is most often reserved for female characters. Alex's identity as the dead girlfriend is the only real thing readers ever know about her. Even almost fifteen years later, when she returns in the event series, *Blackest Night*, that is all she is. To defeat the Green Lanterns, the villainous Black Lanterns reanimate zombie versions of their dead loved ones. While many characters are recreated as dead and desiccated corpses, Alex is just a hand hanging out of refrigerator, flying through space. (Fig. 20)[170] Through raccord and braiding, readers familiar with the comics can see the heroic arc that Kyle has gone through since becoming a hero. Alex however, has remained static. And in helping her appear iconic and recognizable through raccord, she is reduced to simply the fridge, barely even what it is inside of it. The image of a fridge has become the iconic solidarity that defines her. Her identity is constructed exclusively

---

[169] Ron Marz (w) and Darryl Banks (a) *Green Lantern* Vol. 3 #54 (DC Comics, Aug 1994) pp. 10-15

[170] Peter J. Tomasi (w) and Patric Gleason (a) *Green Lantern Corps* Vol. 2 #46 (DC Comics, May 2010) p. 11

on how her being dead has been a part of Kyle's heroes journey. And like the way women are seen in comics, the way they are used as plot points in the narrative is often connected to the body, the violence inflicted on them containing a far more sexual component than the violence inflicted on their male counterparts. In the case of Alex, her body becomes a malleable thing, a prop in the fight between good and evil that can be manipulated, altered, and stored for the purpose of the male character. It highlights a level of control and power that the men in the book have over the women and their bodies. This is seen in an even more sexualized case in the shooting and crippling of Barbara Gordon, a.k.a Batgirl, in *Batman: The Killing Joke*.



Fig. 20 The undying trope of women in refrigerators.

As part of *The Killing Joke*, Barbara's role is primarily to facilitate the narrative. *The Killing Joke* is a story that attempts to portray the origin of the Batman villain, The Joker, and his idea that just one really bad day can drive even the most moral man as mad as he is. The subject of The Joker's experiment is Gotham police commissioner, Jim Gordon, Barbara's father. Part of Jim's really bad day involves The Joker arriving at Jim's house and shooting Barbara, paralyzing her, when she opens the door.[171] Aside from being part of Jim's bad day, Barbara's primary role is to direct Batman towards The Joker[172] and to be used by The Joker as a means of torturing Jim further. Beaten and

[171] Alan Moore (w) and Brian Bolland (a) *Batman: The Killing Joke*. (New York: DC Comics 2008) p.13

[172] ibid p. 18

bound, Jim is shown a series of monitors displaying images of what The Joker did to Barbara after she was shot and Jim was knocked unconscious.(Fig 21)[173] The mise en page gives the reader a clear indication of what is important, and which experience takes precedent in this moment. The single panel that shows Jim's reaction to the images is occupied by inset, smaller panels that represent the screens that Jim is looking at. These panels are all given smaller space, time, and consideration when juxtaposed against larger panel they exist in, the panel that is concerned with Jim's reaction and his experience. It is in this panel that the sexualized torture, and the use of Barbara as a tool to motivate and define the men in the narrative is most prevalent. Barbara is presented parsed out, in pieces, some of the inset panels show her face, bare breasts, thigh, and rear. She is objectified as only parts, never a whole. Even her long history as Batgirl is unimportant to these scenes. Her torture, and implied rape, serve only to add depth to the torture that Jim is required to endure, and paints The Joker as a more villainous character. For the dominant reading position, they are expected to empathize and associate with Jim

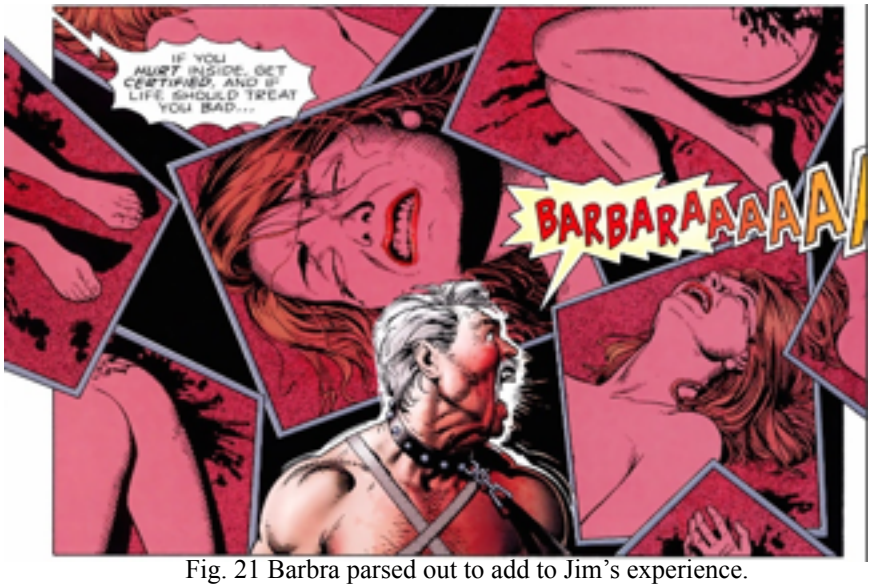


Fig. 21 Barbra parsed out to add to Jim's experience.

[173] ibid p. 25

and his male experience. Barbara's rape and torture, instead of being a violent and sexualized act against her, is presented to the audience as something that is being done to Jim. What is being done to her, is part of Jim's bad day. Along with the other male characters in the narrative, Jim is privileged with a majority of close-ups. In much the same way it functions in classical film, the facial close-up in a comic panel is often an invitation into the character's emotional interior.[174]

In the sequence where Jim is shown the images of his daughter naked, bleeding, and tortured, Jim, his expressions, and reactions are brought to the front of the panel, giving him a place of privilege in the panel itself. His reaction and emotions at the revelation of what happened to Barbra, is presented as the most important experience. Again, Barbara's experience and her body are passive in the panel, static and parsed out to highlight her female otherness. Jim, however, is active, shown with emotional depth. Even with them both stripped naked, Jim's experience is highlighted over his body. Jim being naked is presented to show his muscular figure, to show his strength in the face of evil. Metaphorically, he may be stripped of everything, but he will endure and survive this. Barbara being stripped is part of the torture, it exposes her, unwillingly, to the gaze of the heroes, villains, and readers. Earlier, as Barbara is lying in pain, bleeding, The Joker is shown



Fig. 22 Barbara as prop.

[174] Taylor op cit p. 354

beginning to unbutton Barbara's shirt.(Fig. 22)[175] In this sequence as well, the mise en page shows how diminished her role is in the attack. Though she is glimpsed briefly in a number of the panels, she is really only given time and space within one of the smallest of the panels when juxtaposed against the other panels in on the page. The one panel that she does dominate, is focused on her cleavage and the act of unbuttoning her shirt. Within this seven panel spread, she is nothing more than an object to be manipulated. The same way that Alex's dead body becomes an easily manipulated object in the Green Lantern narrative, being shot and paralyzed, Barbara has become a similar thing. She has lost control of her body, the way she is displayed, and her experiences are predicated on male characters. The Joker is allowed to take control of her body, posing it and presenting it for observation. Once again, the control that men have over the female body is at the center of how power is demonstrated within the superhero comic. It is the loss of female power to control how the body is seen, or by whom. It is also the loss of power to control her own body, that control, and with it her sexuality, is often given fully to the active and dominant male characters.

Barbara's primary function in the narrative, is to be seen and to add to the character arcs and narratives of the men in the story. While not completely a sexy lamp, Barbara is rendered silent in *The Killing Joke* as her past experiences and raccord as Batgirl are forgotten and overshadowed by the male experiences in the narrative and how her experience applies to them. She is also left without space that is not controlled by men or male experiences. While, in many ways, Barbara experiences an equally if not

---

[175] Moore (w), and Bolland (a) op cit p. 14

worse day than her father does, her reactions and emotions are silenced. Having been used to properly motivate the heroes, she has performed her expected gender role and is all but forgotten for the rest of the book. Barbara as an object of a male centric narrative in this situation is especially important for analysis since it is one of the situations where we can see exactly how DC editorial and creators saw her role within the narrative and the wider DC Universe. When interviewed about the book, writer Alan Moore said that he went to then editor Len Wein to ask if it was okay to permanently paralyze and change the course of Barbara and use her within the book. Wein's response was, "Yeah, okay, cripple the bitch."[176] In the process of creating superhero comics, female characters are secondary, disposable, bitches that are used to achieve specific goals in reinforcing and transmitting the ideas of patriarchal power to the dominant reading position, a position that seems to want and desire that message of power and male/female relations communicated to them. Regardless of the history, raccord, or identity that had been established for Barbara and Batgirl, she is easily discarded in the name of furthering male characters, adding depth to their experience, and building male identity. This reflects an idea within patriarchal power structures that female experience is secondary and only of value if it adds to or highlights male experience.

With a dominant reading position, and publishing directives meant to give a perceived male dominant audience the narratives and images it expects, superhero comics have come to be a medium and genre that privileges the male experience and gaze above all others. The comic discourse and the assumed habitus that is required to engage in that

---

[176] Mike Cotton, "Last Call: Preparing for Retirement, Alan Moore Reflects on His Accomplishments" *Wizard Universe* (11 May 2006) <http://www.wizarduniverse.com >

discourse has, over time, consistently rewarded publishers for preferred and expected representations. Through this repetition, the limited ways that female characters, and their bodies, are allowed to perform the discourse's gendered roles have become canonical to the fictional universes of the comics. It is these constrained gender performances that inscribe the female body and experience with a hyper sexed, passive, and objectified representation. Without being displayed and being seen, these female characters would be considered by the dominant reading positions as transgressive and in need of normalizing. The logonomic system would not be functioning properly, if it was not delivering at least a portion of that particular meaning and pleasure. When the system falters or a fissure in the patriarchal power structure occurs, it can cause a sort of anxiety within the dominant position. This anxiety must be limited by having the system reassert and reconstrain the expected meaning and confirmation of power transmitted between producer and consumer within the system. However, as the comic reading audience begins to diversify and more publishers and genres begin to appear, transgressive performances and readings have started to form spaces of resistance, defying and reinterpreting the meaning transmitted along the logonomic system. And in some cases, causing that system to become less effective at perpetuating itself and correcting fissures and breaks against the doxa of canonical meaning.

In looking more specifically at how superhero comics have created this doxic meaning of patriarchal power and constrained, gendered representation, we will look at three primary aspects within the construction of all superhero characters. As has been touched on previously within this chapter, we will look at the costumes that the heroes

and villains wear and the messages they transmit about the gendered body. Since the superhero costume is often constructed to show off, or highlight the body itself, the costume can serve as a strong indicator of the way the gendered body is seen or displayed. The costume can also work to display and transmit information about powers and the abilities that a character possesses. While superhero comics are often seen and described as power fantasies because of the powers and abilities on display, powers also work as a metaphor for sexuality. The acquisition, use, and loss of powers in the superhero narratives, through the logonomic system, is capable of transmitting very specific ideas about the roles and space of sex and sexuality, especially with regards to how sexuality should be seen or understood when gendered or in male/female dominant/ dominated relationships. Both powers and the costumes that are worn are integral pieces in constructing superhero identity. Since both costumes and powers are presented differently based on their gendered context and in line with an expected gender performance, identity is also constructed and presented with those same gendered constraints and expectations of performance. By looking at these three integral pieces of defining and creating characters within superhero comics, we can better see the ideas and of patriarchal power and gender constraints that the logonomic system transmits to deliver an expected meaning and desire to the assumed dominant reading position.

Chapter 4 - Powers/Sexuality

Before engaging in the direct analysis of powers, costumes, and identity, it is important to take a moment to look the ways in which female characters can be labeled as sexualized and objectified. The tension between sexy and sexualized, or the difference between a character who has a sexual identity or is being objectified, is an issue many creators and critics concerned about representation within comics wrestle with. If an artist draws a female character naked, is that character automatically sexualized? If a writer writes a female character who has sex, is that automatically a problematic representation? As with the Bechdel Test, sexy and sexualized exist on a continuum and therefore are not all or nothing situations. Labeling a female character who is drawn or designed with a costume that does not cover her head to toe, has a sexual identity, enjoys sex, or inhabits a traditional gender role is not automatically problematic. This either/or dichotomy limits the agency and diversity of female representation in a different way. There are female characters that are presented fully-clothed in their costumes,have no personal sexual identity, and are still problematic. Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four is a perfect example of this.

Sue's costume has, except for a short time in the 90s, completely covered her. She has been presented as the perfect, chaste girl-next-door. That does not mean she has not been sexualized or constrained to a particular gender performance. In fact, as one of the first female superheroes of the Marvel age of comics, she has been constrained to the role of mother and wife, a helper and support to the three male members of the team. In almost all situations, her experience and sexuality is secondary and dependent on male

experience and sexuality. She is the mother and the sister, and those gendered roles are perceived as sexually conservative.

To mass label all female characters who are not covered head to toe as sexual, or to defame those who are actually sexual, as problematic plays into issues of patriarchal control of the female form and agency. Female characters are often constrained into a small number of normalized, acceptable roles. To perform their gender correctly, women must submit their agency and power to patriarchal authority and align themselves to either the madonna/whore or the angel/monster dichotomy. A female character is either the chaste, monogamous, motherly madonna, or the stripped, slutty, tempting whore. She is there to be of service to the male character and his experience, or she is there to tempt and destroy him. The adherence to this dichotomy leads to the argument that if readers were not supposed to look, ogle, or stare, then they should not be exposed to the gaze of the patriarchy. Essentially, she is the whore that is asking for it, or she is desperate for attention.

To no longer be the whore, she must subject her body to rules of modesty in appearance and give up her sexual autonomy to rules of conduct for her gender. Since these rules are constructed by patriarchal authority, she must either give up her autonomy and power to that authority, or be a willing sexualized object for male pleasure. While these concepts of slut shaming and modesty rhetoric may seem new to some people, these are concepts and perceptions that Wonder Woman was created to combat in the 1940s.

In one of the golden age promotional images of the Amazon Princess, she is shown breaking free of the chains of oppression. The picture was an action image to

show readers what Wonder Woman stood for.(Fig. 23)[177] The chains she is breaking represented what Wonder Woman was fighting against, so all of the chains were labeled with what Marston saw as patriarchal power structures used to oppress women. Prejudice, Man's Superiority, and Prudery were all things that Marston saw as oppressors to women at the time. What is most interesting is the inclusion of prudery. Even then, Marston saw the attempts to control women's bodies and limit their autonomy through control of clothing and the body as a repressive tool. Wonder Woman's iconic representation and publication history has come to mirror the back and forth power struggle of prudery and control of the female body through her costume changes. From the raising and lowering of her bikini line, to the inclusion of swim trunks, pants, and skirts.



Fig. 23 Wonder Woman breaks the chains of patriarchy

Sexual representation is often seen as problematic in modern superhero comics because that is the only representation possible for female characters. The depth, breadth, and diversity of male characters and male experiences in superhero comics means that most male readers can find a character to connect with and find experiences that somehow mirror their own. Over the years of publication, the performances and autonomy afforded white hetero-male characters appear to be limitless. While subtle

---

[177] Dr. Darren R. Reid "Wonder Woman: The Making of a Feminist Superhero" *The Artist in American History* (27 May 2014) <http://www.darrenreidhistory.co.uk/wonder-woman-the-making-of-a-feminist-superhero-yesallwomen-lecture/>

changes and fissures have started to appear, the overwhelming majority of female characters are limited to the performances within the madonna/whore dichotomy. Even the idea of the "Strong Female Character" has begun to feel oppressive and limiting as it has become altered and normalized to the dominant, patriarchal expectations.

Instead of meaning a well-defined character with strengths, weaknesses, and emotions (what the majority of male characters have as default) who happens to be female, it has come to mean a female character that punches, fights, and beats bad guys as well as a male character. In the gender-binary world of superhero comics, it is short hand for a female character who is as good as a man or exhibits parts of male performance. In order for them to be successful in the superhero world, they must exhibit, or take on, what are considered male attributes. Implicit in the "Strong Female Character" label, is that female characters are not, by default, physically or emotionally strong. The term "Strong Male Character" is never used when discussing or advertising male lead comics. Male experience and performance is the default state. They are characters first and foremost: their maleness never comes into cognition. However, in creating female characters, their gender is their default state and defining characteristic. In many ways, female becomes a personality trait and that personality trait is very two dimensional. "Femaleness is perceived as so different, so other, that it needs to be addressed head on. Maleness is the default, so at no time do we ever mention it, we just expect it."[178] For female characters, the difference between sexy and sexualized, character and object, is rooted in personhood and power.

---

[178] Kelley Sue DeConnick (Writer) in discussion with the author, November 2013

Within superhero comics, female sexuality and sexual identity is construed as being only seen as an object or someone who can be controlled. As Naomi Wolf says, "To become successfully sexual, we [women] must not seek and initiate, but wait and yield."[179] Wolf also states, "Being sexy meant waiting and not doing, being watched rather than watching."[180] Superhero comics reflect this idea of female sex and sexuality being passive in relation to male sex and sexuality as active; powerless versus powerful. The image of the sexually aggressive female can be seen within the patriarchal power structure to be emasculating. However, the patriarchal power structure still wants women to desire and provide a steady supply of sex. This image of women shows them as "easy prey that men could trick into having sex."[181] To be passive within the male/female sexual dynamic presents a normalized and expected performance of female sexuality.

To be active, is to be subversive, and when they are subversive, women are labeled as a slut or whore. "To be found out as sluts, is to die [socially and culturally]."[182] Female superheroes and villains reflect this perception of female sexuality and perform to those expectations. In an oddly meta textual moment, the sexually promiscuous and aggressive She-Hulk laying postcoital with the equally promiscuous Iron Man says, "When you do it, everyone calls you a player. When I do it, they call me a skank."[183] Within the context of superhero comics, female sexuality is overwhelmingly perceived

---

[179] Naomi Wolf *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood* (New York: Random House, 1997) p. 39

[180] ibid p. 38

[181] Madrid op cit pp. 257-8

[182] Wolf op cit p. 73

[183] Dan Slot (w) and Rick Burchett (a) *She-Hulk* Vol. 2 #17 (Marvel Comics: May 2007) p. 5

within a patriarchal power structure. Sex, sexuality, and the body are presented to be seen and valued within the structure of hetero-male desire and expectation.

However, points of resistance and fissure within logonomic and patriarchal systems can exist, and it is important to identify and distinguish those points. The portrait of female sexuality and the female body is not inherently wrong or problematic, but the context and values ascribed to them can be. Naomi Wolf says, "Female sexualized nakedness are assumed...to be innately degrading to women. The trouble with this is that it locates the degradation of the women within the sex or the nakedness itself, rather than in the distorted value assigned to that sex and that nakedness."[184] Female sexuality and the female body are not in and of themselves problematic. However, when their meaning is constrained, when they are devalued as things to be used, consumed, and discarded; or to reinforce male dominance and female dominated, they are distorted and rendered problematic.

The Role of Power

At the heart of the superhero narrative, and one of the first necessary pieces in constructing the identities at work in those narratives, is the acquisition of power. By having power, characters become separate from all the other characters around them. It is the power that makes it possible to save lives, defend earth, commit crimes, or engage in a new world that is beyond mortals. For many heroes and villains, having that power opens the door into the superhero or super-villain fraternity. For others, they seek out power to open that door, or to fulfill desires of justice, revenge, and redemption. How

---

[184] Wolf op cit p. 58

these heroes and villains come upon power is as varied as the powers that they have. For some, power is a gift that comes by accident or by chance. If he did not crash land on a planet circling a yellow sun, Superman would be as powerless as any other inhabitant of Earth. If Peter Parker was not accidentally bitten by a radioactive spider, he would never have become the web slinging Spider-Man. For these types of characters, power is bestowed upon them through accidents, scientific mishaps, or chances of birth. For them, having power is not a choice; the choice is in how they use that power. Other characters though, search out power. Because they were not blessed with powers and did not have toxic waste spilled on them, they need to go and find power. Bruce Wayne leaves his comfortable life as an orphaned millionaire to train and learn skills. Dr. Stephen Strange, after having his hands damaged, seeks out a way to compensate for his lost career as a renowned surgeon. Even Tony Stark puts his incredible genius and fortune into building a suit of armour that will give him power. No matter how characters go about receiving power, their power is a vital part of constructing their new identity.

The powers that a character has is important to how readers understand those characters. These powers become part of the character's persona and cannon, which is integral to their space in the discourse of superhero comics. Superman's powers have always been integral to the character. He was often introduced as being "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound."[185] Even Superman's original costume was designed to hint at his powers. The red underwear on the outside of his blue leotard was a call back to the costumes circus strong

---

[185] *Max Fleischer's Superman, 1941-1942* (Warner Home Video: 2009) DVD.

men. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman's creators, wanted readers to immediately know, just by his appearance, that their character was a powerful character.[186] Over the years, Superman's powers have increased and been subtly altered. However, the flying, invulnerable, super strong, Superman has become the dogmatic representation of the character.

These powers and abilities beyond those of normal humans is what has come to define the term "super" in the superhero narrative.[187] Even characters without other worldly or world-shattering powers are defined by how they can overcome that perceived handicap. Characters like Batman, Blue Beetle, or Hawkeye have superior intellects, futuristic gadgets, olympian level physical skills, and/or dedicated training. While these characters may not be able to knock a villain through a brick wall, they can devise a strategy or invention to stop the villain. For these characters, the lack of other worldly powers helps to define them. Batman's lack of superhuman powers eventually leads him to devise ways to defeat his powered allies in the Justice League.[188] How they decide to use their powers is what informs their idea of what a hero actually is. Superman, Iron Man, Batman, and Hawkeye are superheroes because they use their powers for altruistic or heroic purposes. However, having power, even the search for power, does not automatically translate into a heroic purpose.

---

[186] Levitz op cit p. 47

[187] ibid p. 48

[188] Mark Waid (w) and Howard Porter and Drew Geraci (a) *JLA: Tower of Babel* (New York: DC Comics, 2001) and Geoff Johns (w) and Gene Ha, Andres Guinaldo and Joe Prado (a) *Justice League* Vol. 2 #40 (DC Comics July 2013)

Dr. Victor Fries was a scientist working on a way to cure his wife's terminal illness and lengthen her life. Through interference and an accident, Fries receives powers. Instead of becoming a hero, he becomes the villain Mr. Freeze. As Mr. Freeze, he vows to get revenge on those who prevented him from helping his wife. The Captain America villain Red Skull, like Dr. Strange or Batman, went in search of power through science and mysticism, but uses those powers in support of the Third Reich and to spread Nazism. Like the heroes, the villains either have power bestowed on them or they go searching for it; their choices and how they decide to use that power dictates their role within the narrative. While Spider-Man and Green Arrow spend part of their heroic time dealing with muggers and car jackers, the memorable villains and criminals are those who have power. Their power marks them and influences all of the other aspects of their identity. Within superhero narratives, powers become common place and expected, making them a trope of the genre. These powers become how the world and the individual become defined. A character's powers and abilities are so seamlessly integrated into who they are that the powers become short-hand for defining the characters themselves. Readers expect to see The Flash moving at super speed. The absence of the expected powers is noticeable and a frequent narrative tool in creating conflict.

As integral as power is to the superhero narrative and the construction of characters within these narratives, noting the differences in gendered representation and the construction of male and female characters is important. While both men and women can receive and find power, the context, use, and constraining of that power is different

across gendered lines. Where male access and use of power is limitless and expected, female power is constrained and controlled within the patriarchal power structure that the logonomic system reinforces. Male characters have more inherent power, an inevitable part of who they are. Female characters' powers are gifted or controlled by male authority. Where patriarchy is the seat of power, any power can only flow to female characters through the permission and control of that patriarchal authority. While many female characters are born with powers - Supergirl and the women of the X-Men all have inborn powers - patriarchal authority exists within the narrative to instruct them on appropriate uses of those powers, to place those powers in check, or simply to take those powers away, if need be.

This control and constraining of power within the Superhero narrative works to transmit ideas about female power in the real world. It tells a dominant, male, reading position that their authority and power is greater than any perceived female power, and that female power only exists because of patriarchal power's permission. However, the power dynamics and relationships within superhero narratives also transmit a semantic message about sex and sexuality. Within the superhero narrative, power works as a metaphor for sex and sexuality. The process of acquiring powers and mastering those powers reflects adolescent journeys of puberty and sexual development. For many characters, the moment of transition from unpowered to powered occurs during puberty or the transitional phase from adolescents to adulthood. Not only does the superhero narrative transmit ideas about power and gendered power, but also about sex and gendered sex. It is one of the primary functions of the logonomics system to encode and

transmit ideas of female power, sexual roles, and performance that coincide with the expectations and perceptions of a dominant reading position. Where male sex and sexuality is dominant and active, female sexuality should be dominated and passive. To move outside of those performances and control her own power and sexuality independent of male authority, is seen as dangerous or monstrous.

Patriarchy Dependent Power

As the patriarchal power structure is reinforced within superhero comics, men and patriarchy become the ultimate sources and controllers of power. It does not matter if it is kung fu training, a suit of armour, radioactive animals, or an ancient temple in the Himalayas, the power that characters receive is either through, because of, or controlled by male characters and authority. This means that if female characters are going to receive power, they must rely on the men around them. Male power is integral to the inheriting or approving of powers. There is most often a male figure who can step in to control or constrain female characters with inborn powers. For those who do not have inborn powers, those powers come from an already recognized source of male power. For a character like Jennifer Walters, aka She-Hulk, gaining power is dependent on the intervention of an already existing male character, in this case her cousin Bruce Banner.

When the reader first meets Jennifer, she is a criminal defense attorney. Jennifer is presented as smart and successful at her job. However, within the world of superhero comics, it is initially her connection to her cousin that makes her notable and significant to the reader.[189] Real power, or at least the power to stop criminals and save her client, is

---

[189] Lee (w) and Buscem (a) *The Savage She-Hulk* op cit. p. 5

something that Jennifer does not have access to. Even her education and success are ineffectual power when placed against the mob boss she is trying to convict. The narrative of Jennifer's origin functions to show how powerless she is as simple Jennifer Walters. Even the small bit of skill, authority, or power that she does posses as a successful attorney is brought into question.

In the first issue of *The Savage She-Hulk* (published in February 1980), Jennifer does reflect some of the societal changes and gender roles that were becoming more prevalent in the wake of second wave feminism and and the women's liberation movement. Women were moving into more visible careers and positions of power, and it was becoming more common to see women with careers in fields that were traditionally male dominated.[190] By giving Jennifer a job as a successful criminal attorney she was a realistic representation of the roles that many women were entering into. However, these career women were often seen as points of resistance to traditional gender roles. Through the activism of feminists in the 60s and 70s, women were starting to gain some parity with their male counter parts. However, this cultural shift was met with resistance. Women were entering into these nontraditional roles, but prevailing opinions still maintained that they were less effective than their male counterparts. The believe was, just because a woman could become a lawyer didn't mean she should or that she would be an equal to her male peers.[191]

---

[190] Madrid op cit p. 257

[191] ibid p. 258

These retrenching of patriarchal power works its way into the representation of Jennifer. Even as she explains her plan to prove her client's innocence and reveal the identity of the real murderer, Bruce Banner calls her plan into question and insists that it is a dangerous and reckless plan: "Jen, you're playing with fire! You're too vulnerable — too unprotected."[192] It does not matter that Bruce's education and training are in a completely different field or that he lacks experience in the field of criminal justice, because by virtue of being male alone he has access to a wider understanding and perception of the case than his female cousin, according to gendered expectations.

After pointing out the flaws in her plan, Bruce also implies that Jennifer is weak, powerless, and vulnerable. He says that she lacks the sort of power that is required to deal with crime and criminals. This type of power in superhero comics comes in the form of extra human abilities like his own. To punctuate Bruce's warnings about her faulty plan, the next panel shows Jennifer being shot by henchmen of the mob boss she had hoped to indict and put in jail. At that moment she becomes passive and secondary to her cousin in the process of receiving her powers.[193]

For male characters, the process of receiving power puts them in an active role. Even when the power comes from an accident, the male character is involved in some heroic or villainous action that puts them in the path of power. She-Hulk's counter part, The Hulk, received his power as was a result of being active. Though he was accidentally irradiated by the gamma bomb blast when he ran out onto the test range to save the life of

---

[192] Lee (w) and Buscem (a) *The Savage She-Hulk* op cit. p. 6

[193] ibid p. 7

a young man who had wandered out into the blast radius, it was his active choice to do so.[194] Similarly, the hero Daredevil receives his powers after being covered in toxic waste, which was the result of an accident in when he pushed an old man out of the way of a truck. Bruce and Matt's heroism is the catalyst of receiving powers. The connection between these two heroes origins is something that would have been clear to the devoted Marvel readers at the time. Through braiding and overlaying a series of semantic correspondence through the origin stories of Marvel characters, characters with similar narratives of acquiring power are expected and understood. The heroism of Bruce in particular is reinforced to the reader when he reiterates the story of his origin to Jennifer in the first issue of *Savage She-Hulk*[195].

For a first issue that is intended to introduce the reader to She-Hulk - the cover even proclaims in all caps, "Stan Lee proudly presents: The She-Hulk Lives"[196] - and to how she gains her powers, the narrative relegates Jennifer to a secondary position juxtaposed against her cousin. Of the seventeen pages of story, nine of those pages could be mistaken for any other issue of *The Incredible Hulk*. In fact, four of those pages involve Jennifer being unconscious as her cousin comes to her rescue.

When the time comes for Jennifer to receive power, not only is she inactive in the process, she is unconscious. After being shot, she is rendered passive and takes no part in the process of receiving power. In Jennifer's origin it is Bruce's heroism and role as an active and powered protagonist that allows him to defeat the criminals, save Jennifer's

---

[194] Lee (w) and Kirby (a) *The Incredible Hulk* op cit pp. 3-4

[195] Lee (w) and Buscem (a) *The Savage She-Hulk* op cit. pp. 2-3

[196] ibid Cover

life, and gift her power. Even in the moment of her transformative trauma, it is Bruce, not Jennifer, who is the focus of her starting along the path to being a superhero.

As Jennifer lies on the ground, shot and unconscious, Bruce is the active character in the narrative. He fights off the hired assassins, and quickly comes to his cousin's aid. "She's still breathing! Have to save her, somehow!"[197] The process of saving Jennifer requires Bruce to give her a blood transfusion. Knowing that their blood type matches, Bruce gives his gamma-irradiated blood to her and imbues her with many of the powers that he possesses. In the case of Jennifer, her power, the power that allows her to become She-Hulk, literally comes from male power. The power and radiation that is inside of Bruce is transferred to Jennifer through needles and tubing. Her powers and her new green-skinned appearance are all constructed, defined, and shaped by male action and intervention. Jennifer is dependent on the patriarchy for active power. It is her cousin's powers and appearance as The Hulk that define and signal to the reader what her powers are.

Later, while Jennifer is recuperating in the hospital, she transforms into She-Hulk for the first time. The image of her with green skin and ripped clothing, braids back to images of her cousin and how his power is defined. Even the criminals who show up to finish the job they had started make the connection between the power that Jennifer has as She-Hulk and the powers that her cousin has. "Her skin! It-it's green!"[198] notes one of the criminals. His partner makes the connection that the reader has hopefully already

---

[197] ibid p. 9

[198] ibid p. 13

made: “It’s like — she’s some kind a She-Hulk.”[199] In the greater shared Marvel Universe, the criminals have labeled her a female version of The Hulk because of the similarity of appearance and power. Like the dominant reading position that the comic was created for, the villains are able to understand the concept of the male Bruce Banner’s powers and their visual indicators. This iconic solidarity is simply overlaid onto a female version of Bruce’s appearance and powers. Like the similarities that are reflected in how power is received by The Hulk and Daredevil, She-Hulk’s narrative takes on aspects of The Hulk’s origin. However, instead of the two people being considered equal or unique the way Daredevil and The Hulk are, She-Hulk’s origin is lessened and overlaid by the more dominant aspects of The Hulk’s origin.

Even after she receives power, She-Hulk’s journey to becoming a superhero is dependent on the power she receives from patriarchal authority. She becomes defined by male interference, action, and intervention. Before she becomes powered, Jennifer is shown incapable of protecting and taking care of herself. However, when she is given her new powers she is able to protect herself. Bruce’s act of saving her and giving her a blood transfusion comes to define how she is able to act and allows her entrance into the superhero world. Her origin and powers are inseparable from Bruce. Without him, and without the patriarchal intervention he represents, she would not be able to gain power. As She-Hulk herself says, “Power! That means no one can push me around! No one!”[200] As She-Hulk, Jennifer is no longer passive or an easy target for criminals. She has the

---

[199] ibid p. 19

[200] David Anthony Kraft (w) and Mike Vosburg (a). *The Savage She-Hulk* #6 (Marvel Comics, July 1980) p. 5

power to fight crime and be part of the larger superhero world, but that power is dependent on already existing male power. This need for male authority and power to bestow power is not reserved just for She-Hulk or other female heroes, but also necessary for female villains to receive power as well.

Paging Dr. Isley

Pamela Isley, aka Poison Ivy, is an ecoterrorist and long time Batman villain. Since her original publication in the 1960s, she has received a number of retcons and reinterpretations of her origin. In both her original silver age and later modern age origin men are responsible for giving her her powers Just like Jennifer Walters, Pamela's powers come through her inaction and passivity. In her canonical origins, Pamela fits into the performance of helpmate and girlfriend. She is easily seduced by a strong male figure who then then poisons her with chemicals, toxins, or herbs.

In her modern age origin,[201] Pamela is a student at a prestigious university studying biochemistry under Dr. Jason Woodrue.[202] From the outset, Pamela is presented as subservient to patriarchal authority. Instead of being a student and someone who can inherit power, knowledge, and authority from Woodrue, she transitions into the role of girlfriend and unwitting subject. Within a patriarchal structure, the role of inheritor of Woodrue's knowledge and authority should go to a male student, someone that can replace Woodrue in the role of authority. Pamela's fellow class mate, Alec Holland, takes

---

[201] In the retelling of her modern origin, Pamela is asked about her silver age origin and claims that she was lying about what had happened. Claiming that this new origin is the real one.

[202] Neil Gaiman (w) and Mark Buckingham (a) "Pavane" *Secret Origins* Vol. 2 #36 (DC Comics January 1989) p. 31

up that role and becomes a successful scientist and the hero Swamp Thing.[203] However, to perform femaleness correctly, Pamela needs to be a passive object to be experimented on. As part of those experiments, Woodrue injects her with plant-based chemicals and toxins. Pamela admits, "I don't know what he gave me in those college experiments,[204]" but she does know they "Killed me. Killed her. Birthed me."[205] Like Jennifer, Pamela has power bestowed on her through the actions of a male character on to a passive female character.

In the case of Pamela, the act of giving her powers is a malicious act and in no way meant to help her the way Bruce helps Jennifer. Through patriarchal authority, Pamela is given power that she would never have access to and it sends her on a trajectory to gaining a new appearance and identity constructed from a patriarchal foundation. Like She-Hulk, Poison Ivy is no longer weak and vulnerable. She has "The power to ignore the rules, to circumvent them, to play a different game, your own game."[206] Though Ivy may think she is playing her own game, that game still has rules. Her power is still controlled and constrained by patriarchal authority. She is beholden to it as the source of her power, and no matter how powerful she may be, she is still incapable of beating the ultimate example of patriarchal authority, Batman. Batman functions to assuage any fear or anxiety that might come from Ivy's unchecked female power and the unchecked female sexuality that her power represents.

---

[203] Neil Gaiman (w) and Dave McKean (a) *Black Orchid* (New York: DC Comics, 1991)

[204] Gaiman (w) and Buckingham (a) op cit p. 36

[205] ibid p. 36

[206] ibid p. 33

Poison Ivy's powers are coded with an overtly sexual connotation. Ivy falls into the femme fatale character type and is supposed to be seen as sexual. She uses sex to get what she wants, which is expected by the dominant reading position. As she is presented in *Secret Origins* issue 36, Ivy is a character who is aware of her power as a sexual being. She recognizes this sexual identity and that it is rooted into who she is as a character. In conversation with Inspector Stewart, who has come to interview her in prison, Ivy talks about what she gained from Woodrue and how she understands the nature of power as applied to her. She says "I'd found something else I was good at…I would call it power. Money is power. Sex is power."(Fig. 24)[207] After having received power, Ivy realizes that her power is located within ideas of money and sex. The text box that contains this dialog is placed over two images that highlight the fact that Ivy's powers are sexual in nature. The mise en page is broken into three equal panels, with smaller inset panels placed on the left of each panel. The first panel has Batman and Robin centered in the panel, looking out towards the reader. They are framed within the panel by a jailer on the right who is handcuffed to Ivy on the left.



Fig. 24 Poison Ivy and the nature of her

[207] ibid p. 33

However, all we see of Ivy is her arm in a handcuff, and her rear end.[208] The pose and framing is very similar to the way Ivy appeared *Gotham City Sirens* example last chapter. Though that example was published almost 20 years after this issue, it has become an expected way to position Ivy within a panel. And like with the previous example, this panel communicates the idea that Ivy is primary sexual.

Poison Ivy powered, which means she is a sexual being. As the femme fatale who is now in possession of power, she is the slut and the monster. Before having power, she is portrayed as unattractive and unappealing to men. She even admits, "I was a really ugly little kid," and, "I discovered boys when I was five. They discovered me when I was fifteen. It was a long ten years"[209] It is not until she meets Woodrue and is seduced by him that she transitions in power and sexuality. Pamela to Poison Ivy is a transition from unpowered to powered and sexless to sexual.

When she tells Inspector Stewart that sex is power and money is power, the panel shows her full body wearing her trademark leafy bathing suit, surrounded by plants and money. The focus of this panel is on the money and money as power aspect of Ivy's quote. The previous panel though is focused on sex as power, particularly Ivy's powers and their sexual context. The Fact that Ivy now embodies sexuality and the power that it represents is highlighted by placing her back side prominently in the panel. Where male characters are also sexual beings and have sexual relationships, that sexuality is part of their personality or character. There is no need to physically highlight Batman's rear or

---

[208] ibid p. 33

[209] ibid p. 30

place only his crotch in a panel. For female characters like Ivy to be sexual and powerful, is to to invite the static gaze of the dominant reading position. Regardless of her actual powers, her being powered is presented visually via her body and the primal indicators of femaleness.

Throughout *Secret Origins*, Ivy's sexuality, particularly her powered body as a sexual body, is highlighted over and over again. Most of the narrative is delivered through Inspector Stewarts point of view, as he obsesses over her becomes more and more attracted to Ivy. At the beginning of the story, Stewart is warned by one of the prison guards, "I think she's the kind of person it'd be dangerous to have as a friend, because she'd devour you. And dangerous to have as a lover, because she'd suck you out and leave you empty."[210] Ivy's powers and her sexuality make her monstrous. This type of dialogue transmits a specific idea about women that are overly sexual. While the slut may be appealing, she is duplicitous and her sexuality becomes a weapon that can destroy men. If that sexuality and power is not constrained or controlled, she will devour, destroy, and leave men empty. Women like this are fine to be seen - the way Ivy is seen through the images of monitors - but to confronting her is dangerous.

The warnings of the sexually monstrous female are too late for Stewart. He has already spent three panels on the previous page watching Ivy in her cell. He says, "I wonder if she



Fig. 25 Inspector Stewart watches Ivy undress

[210] ibid p. 29

knows we're watching her…pretty Ivy. Poison Ivy."(Fig. 25)[211] The "we" in Stewarts dialog is a reference to the guards at the prison, but also makes the reader culpable in watching Ivy. Unlike Stewart, the reader is not affected Ivy's ability to release pheromones that can make them fall in love with her. Eventually Stewart becomes victim to all of Ivy's powers and their sexual nature. Outside of her cell, Stewart's hand burns and blisters from her toxic touch.[212] Her kiss on his cheek makes him ill and leaves a red impression of lips. Stewart says, "I throw up in the men's room, then I wash my face, and I see her kiss. I hope it will fade."[213] Ivy's powers all come into play through actions and circumstances that are normally seen as affectionate or sexually intimate. Stewart was warned that Poison Ivy, as a lover, could destroy a man. In Ivy's case, that warning is both figurative and literal.

With her powers so closely connected to her sexuality, Poison Ivy works as the perfect example of how female power and female sexuality are seen as dangerous when not controlled. Controlling She-Hulk is simple since her power comes from and are dictated by patriarchal authority and heroism. While Ivy's power also comes from patriarchal authority, it is also constrained by that same authority. Batman and the male guards are always there to subdue her. Even when she is able to get the upper hand on a male character, the reader expects to see her recaptured and returned to Arkham Asylum. The end of *Secret Origins* places her in just such a place, constrained, controlled, and

---

[211] ibid p. 28

[212] ibid p. 36

[213] ibid p. 39

being seen by the reader through the monitor and camera. (Fig. 26)[214]



Fig. 26 Poison Ivy locked away in her cell

Ivy's powers and her transition into a powered villain as a metaphor for her becoming sexual is not an isolated notion. Looking back at Jennifer and her transition to She-Hulk, we see a similar transition from nonsexual and powerless to sexual and powered. This connection to obtaining power and obtaining sexual identity occurs within most origin stories and across gendered lines. The argument has been made that superhero comics and their portrayals of super powered fights feeds into adolescent power fantasies.[215] However, through an examination of the role of powers in a character's development can also be read as a metaphor for sex and sexuality. The idea of receiving powers and developing a new identity correlates with many aspects of adolescent development through puberty. Not only can this correlation be seen in the examples of She-Hulk and Poison Ivy, but also in the origin story of Peter Parker, Spider-Man.

Super Powered Puberty

In his first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, Peter Parker is presented as the everyman teenager as he negotiates school, girls, and teenage life. Peter Parker is the underdog. He's the unpopular kid who is not very confident. Like many of the potential

---

[214] ibid p. 39

[215] Mark Waid "The Real Truth About Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too" *Superheroes and Philosophy* Edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005) pp. 3-10

readers of the comic, he is navigating a life changed by puberty and the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. For young Peter Parker, this transition is not easy. Where other boys his age would be trying to figure out their changing voice and how to shave, Peter Parker has to figure out how to negotiate spider-like powers. Receiving powers, like gaining more muscle definition or growth spurts during puberty, gives Peter a new level of attractiveness and physical desirability.[216]

Before being bit by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker is portrayed as thin, frail, uncoordinated, and undesirable to women. Throughout his first appearance, his advances are rebuffed and he is compared to the more attractive or sexually appealing Flash Thompson: "Peter, for the umpteenth time, you're just not my type. Not when dream boats like Flash Thompson are around."(Fig. 27)[217] Without any powers, Peter is sexually inferior. Flash Thompson does not have superpowers, but within the hierarchy of high school his physical skills as an athlete constitute powers. By gaining his superpowers, Peter Parker is able to surpass even the power that Flash may demonstrate on the football field. With powers, Peter can construct a new identity that is not weak and is more appealing to members of the opposite sex.



Fig. 27 Peter Parker getting turned down for Flash Thompson

---

[216] Stan Lee (w) and Steve Ditko (a) "Spider-Man!" *Amazing Fantasy* Vol. 1 #15 (Marvel Comics August 1962)

[217] ibid p. 2

As Spider-Man himself attests on the cover of *Amazing Fantasy* #15, the mockery by being dismissed by women will disappear now that he has the powers of Spider-Man: "Though the world may mock Peter Parker, the timid teenager, it will soon marvel at the awesome might of Spider-Man."(Fig. 28)[218] As much as puberty leads to sexual maturity, being bit by the radioactive spider leads Peter Parker to the powers that allow him to be Spider-Man and become more sexually confident and appealing. This idea is repeated in later retellings of Spider-Man's origin. In the Ultimate Spider-Man comics Peter is again bullied by his class mates and ignored by the girls he is interested in, After the fateful spider bite, he flirts with Mary Jane, joins the high school basketball team, and becomes the object of sexual attention from girls who had ignored him.[219] For the mutant X-Men, the connection between puberty and gaining power is literal.



Fig. 28 Cover to *Amazing Fantasy* #15

The team of mutants the X-Men are described as, "Children of the atom, students of Charles Xavier, mutants - feared and hated by the world they have sworn to protect."[220] Unlike other superheroes and villains in the Marvel Universe, mutants are born mutants. Their powers develop and manifest during puberty. These powers can take

---

[218] ibid Cover

[219] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Mark Bagley (a) *Ultimate Spider-Man Vol. 1: Power and Responsibility* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009)

[220] Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006) p. 5

any number of forms. Some mutants have telekinetic powers, the ability to phase through solid objects, or the ability to control the weather. Others manifest abilities that disfigure them like growing a tail, blue fur, or frog-like tongues. The X-Men are a metaphor for the physical changes that occur in puberty. Instead of developing breasts, facial hair, or acne, X-Men develop fantastic powers. While learning to control the sexual urges and hormonal changes going on in their bodies, the X-Men must also learn to control their powers. For the X-Men, coming into puberty and coming of age means coming into power. Spider-Man and the X-Men are metaphors for young people coming of age and coming to terms with their adolescent sexuality. In this metaphor, coming to terms with their powers represent coming to terms with their sexuality.

While other heroes and villains may develop their powers at later stages of life, the acquisition and mastery of those powers reflect these same coming of age narratives. Puberty marks the beginning of a transition into becoming an adult and developing a new identity. In the superhero narrative, this transition is marked by receiving power. The acquisition of powers starts a transitional journey into a new identity. Spider-Man, Poison Ivy, and She-Hulk all illustrate a transition towards sexuality and attractiveness to the opposite sex. Clark Kent, the powerless alter ego of Superman, is unattractive and unappealing to Lois Lane, but the powerful Superman is the object of Lois' attention and affection.[221] Many of the early adventures of Lois Lane involved her trying to trick

---

[221] Grant Morrison (w) and Frank Quietly (a) *All-Star Superman* #1 (DC Comics, January 2006) pp. 21-22

Superman into marrying her while she ignored Clark fawning over her.[222] Similar to Superman, She-Hulk experiences a change in her sexual identity when she gains her powers.

Jennifer Walters was illustrated as a conservatively dressed lawyer. Once she gainer her power and is transformed into She-Hulk, her green cleavage is on display and her character becomes more sexually aggressive. Like The Hulk, She-Hulk is usually Jennifer, but when she gets angry she became powered and transformes. By the end of her first series, she had learned to control her transformations and decids to stay as She-Hulk permanently. She says, "I'm She-Hulk almost all of the time because I want to be. Because it's exciting!"[223] Being She-Hulk means that she was allowed to participate in the powered world of superhero comics, but it also means being a sexual being.[224] Even as a sexual being, She-Hulk's sexuality is presented and treated very differently from how her male counterparts are treated.

For characters like Poison Ivy and She-Hulk to become powered and sexual means to be an object of the male gaze. Ivy's rear end and She-Hulk's breasts are always on display. For male characters like Superman and Spider-Man, sexuality takes on the context of desirability and the ability to be more active. The powered Spider-Man and Superman have multiple potential partners. Powered/sexual male characters are given multiple sexual opportunities and multiple potential sexual conquests as a symbol of their

---

[222] This is actually a common theme through the almost 16 years and 137 issues of *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*. Most notably though, is issue #86; a giant sized, "All-Wedding Issue" Published in October of 1968 it contains 8 different stories of Lois trying, failing, succeeding, or dreaming about a marriage to Superman.

[223] Madrid op cit p. 257

[224] ibid p. 257

new found power and sexuality, but female characters are placed in sexually passive roles. They are required to wait and be seen. This transmits an expected message to the dominant reading position about how sexuality and sex should function within a patriarchal structure.

Sex is something that is controlled, dictated, and constrained by male authority. Sex happens on male terms and always within male control. In the encounter between Poison Ivy and Inspector Stewart, when she takes his hand and kisses him, she is in control as male authority and constraint is removed. This makes Ivy's sexuality dangerous, destructive, and grotesque. Without male authority to control and dictate the terms, uses, and consumption of female sexuality, it will all go wrong. The assumption is that women are incapable of controlling their own sexuality. In comics, this also means that women cannot control their own powers.

Many female characters do have sexual appetites and desire. However, it is assumed that for the dominant reading position to understand those desires, they must be framed through male experience and a male understanding of female sexuality. To have sexual or powered freedom, the female characters must be constrained. To move outside of that constraint is to be subversive and in need of normalization through the logonomic system. Unchecked female sexuality, which is unchecked power, is a source of anxiety and in opposition to expected female performance. To be normalized, that sexuality needs to be controlled. In terms of the superhero narrative, that character needs to be depowered or constrained. Female sexuality needs to be subject to male control or presented for male pleasure, consumption, and objectification. The narrative works to construct the female

form and to house the expectations, fetishes, and codes of a male dominant reading position. This functions to present an image of expectation and an attempt at normalization to potential female agents entering the field of comics or engaging in the reading process.

Rogue and the Myth of the Southern Belle

The X-Men provide some of the most compelling examples of the correlations between sexuality and power and how female power and sexuality are constrained in superhero comics. The development of mutant powers occur at the same time as development of sexual maturity and those mutant powers are interwoven into how the characters develop and deal with sexual maturity and relationships. When the mutant Toad develops greenish skin and a long sticky tongue, it changes how he interacts with members of the opposite sex. Similarly, Rogue's mutant power to absorb the powers and memories of anyone she touches changes the type of relationships she can have. Her powers also reflect myths of femaleness and female performance in the American South. Born in Mississippi where she learned French and English, Rogue reflects the image and experience of many young women born into the deep south. Specifically, she embodies the ideas and performance of femaleness constructed by the myth of the Southern Belle. Narratively, this paradigmatic choice and the meaning it transmits constrain Rogue's sexuality and her powers, forcing her into the role of angel, virgin, and proper lady.

When discussing the myth of the Southern Belle and its cultural impact, Diane Roberts notes that the rules of a proper Souther Belle is based on a fear that women "might escape the rule of the patriarchy, that the opposition of white/black, master/slave,

lady/whore, even male/female might collapse into an anarchic conflagration threatening to bring down the symbolic order."[225] The myth of the Southern Belle is based on maintaining distinctions between genders and to make sure those genders are performed in specific ways to maintain a power structure and hierarchal dynamic. The myth of the Southern Belle, like in superhero comics, demands discreet genders. How those genders are performed are integral to maintaining a structure of active/passive and dominant/ dominated. As Rogue performs as the Southern Belle, she reassures the reader that the mythology that her performance represents is reinforcing the gendered binaries. Her performance is not arbitrary, and the meaning about female sexuality and female power the the performance communicates, is an expected performance.

Rogue's mutant ability allows her to absorb the powers, memories, thoughts, and general life force of anyone with whom she makes skin to skin contact. However, canonically, she has no control over her power. To constrain her power, she is required to wear gloves and a body covering costume. This covering prevents her from accidentally making skin contact. Her powers and her costume create a barrier between her and other characters. When her powers are used unchecked and to their full potential, the effects are destructive.[226]

The nature of her power limits the level of intimacy Rogue is able to experience. Her powers manifest during an adolescent moments where she experiments with intimacy and sexuality. Sneaking off with a young boy, Rogue kisses him on an impulse and her

---

[225] Diane Roberts *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994) p. xii

[226] Chris Claremont (w) and Michael Golden (a) *Avengers Annual* Vol. 1 #10 (Marvel Comics: August 1981) p. 4

power absorbs his life energy and memories, putting him into a coma.[227] This dramatic experience with her powers frames the ways that both her powers and her sexuality are presented. Her fear of hurting anyone the way she did her first boyfriend influences her costume choice and limits the the level of intimacy she is willing to share with other characters. This constrains her sexuality and her sexual expression. She says in a moment of frustration, "Ah'm tired of goin' through life wearin' prophylactics on both of ma hands."[228] The choice to refer to the barriers she sets up as prophylactics is a telling paradigmatic choice. Her powers, her sexuality, are connected and limited by the way her powers and her sexual performance have been constrained.

To have her powers uncovered, no longer constrained, is a dangerous proposition that has proven to be destructive to men. When longtime love interest Gambit tries[229] to touch, kiss, and comfort Rogue, Rogue smacks him away. "Don't ya get it?! It won't happen 'cause it can't! My entire mutant power is about restraint. I can't touch another livin' person without fear of swallowin' that person whole! Their thoughts an' hopes an' dreams become mine. Ah got no control over my abilities"[230] Rogue communicates the idea that female power and sexuality needs to be constrained and controlled or it will be destructive. Her power and her sexuality must be restrained and maintained within a

---

[227] Scott Lobdell (w) and Richard Bennett (a) *X-Men Unlimited* Vol. 1 #4 (Marvel Comics: March 1994) p. 9

[228] Mike Carey (w) and Scot Eaton and Marco Checchetto (a) *X-Men: Legacy* Vol. 1 #215 (Marvel Comics October 2008) p. 18

[229] He tries a lot. The dynamic of their early relationship is Gambit trying to have sex with Rogue and her turning him away because of fears of her powers.

[230] Scott Lobdell (w) and Brandon Peterson (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #297 (Marvel Comics February 1993) p. 13

prescribed set of rules. This set of rules is seen in Rogue's performance as a proper Southern Belle.

In describing what her powers could do to Gambit - or any man for that matter - the language used is similar to what Poison Ivy and her unconstrained sexuality could do to men. Where Poison Ivy devours men, sucks them out, and leaves them empty,[231] Rogues unconstrained power and sexuality would swallow them whole. Without restraint and constraint, female power and sexuality is all consuming and all destructive. The reader comes to understand, that to be consumed by these women is to be destroyed. To prevent that, their powers must be controlled and constrained.

Rogue constructs a barrier between herself and anyone else around her. This provides an example of her performance as the proper and gentile Southern Belle. This performance provides a set of rules and a structure that keep her powers and sexuality constrained and restrained. To be a proper Belle "The belle had to deny her sexuality and, at the same time, perform passion without taking part in it." At all times, she was supposed to express "the virtues she should have been the embodiment of - beauty, passivity, submissiveness, virginity, and asexuality."[232] The very nature of her powers and the rules that constrained them meant that Rogue must embody virginity and asexuality as part of her gender performance.

The patriarchal system of control and dominance at the heart of the myth of the Southern Belle is also at the heart of how Rogue and her powers are presented to the

---

[231] Gaiman (w) and Buckingham (a) op cit p. 29

[232] Biljana Oklopčić "Southern Bellehood (De)constructed: A Case Study of Blanche Dubois" *Americana* Vol. 4 no. 2 (2008) <http://americanaejournal.hu/vol4no2/oklopcic>

reader. As the Southern Belle, Rogue may be virginal, but her sexuality is still objectified. The belle is required to perform passion or to be the embodiment of beauty. Rogue is also required to be the embodiment of beauty while being seen and objectified. Though she needs to maintain her virginal status, she still needs to be sexually available. Both narratively and visually, Rogue is presented as sexually available, objectifiable. Her sexuality is something that can be obtained or purchased, just so long as a certain set of gentlemanly rules are followed. This transmits the idea to the reader that female sexuality is a commodity or a prize. After enough persistence and adherence to the rules, her sexuality can be won and owned by the right gentlemanly victor. In the case of Rogue, that victor, and a stand in for the perceived dominant reader, is Gambit.



Fig. 29 Rogue on a night out

Before a date with Gambit, Rogue explains the rules of her performance as the Southern Belle and how those rules constrain her sexuality. Dressed up for her night out she informs Gambit that "A lady has to look her best when she goes out on the town, Gambit. After all, there might be some real gentlemen at that restaurant."(Fig. 29)[233] A major part of Rogue's performance is to be available and ready for the right gentleman to come along, follow the prescribed rules, and win her heart. For her part in this performance, Rogue needs to dress and present herself in a sexually appealing way. This is

[233] Byrn (w) and Lee (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #04 op cit p. 20

all because "Courtship, innocent romances, and, consequently, marriage were considered to be the highest aspirations of her life, the belle's energies and skills were mainly directed to finding and marrying a real Southern gentleman."[234] As a true Southern Belle, Rogue must constantly be submissive, demure, and sexually available. By doing all of this, she can find the right gentleman to control her sexuality and powers.

The give and take between Gambit and Rogue is part of the belle's courtship and romance. Gambit works to prove he is the right type of gentleman to control her sexuality and power. Gambit suggests that he can withstand or resist Rogue's life-force stealing powers. After being told he is not allowed to touch or kiss her because of her powers, Gambit suggests, "But don't nobody know how Gambit loves a challenge."[235] As a southern gentleman, Gambit assumes that he has the ability to control, contain, and overcome any dangerous effects of her mutant powers. This assumption is not far fetched for the dominant reading position to understand or expect. Within the context of superhero comics, female power and sexuality is constrained and controlled by male power and authority.

For Gambit to be able to control Rogue's power and sexuality, he needs to adhere to the dominant, male role established by Rogue's performance as the Southern Belle. She tells him, "Ah'm a woman. If ya can't, if ya won't, treat me like one, then please leave me alone."[236] Rogue, and the narrative's, definition of woman and femaleness needs to be understood and defined by the Southern Belle myth. By overlaying this myth

---

[234] Oklopčić op cit

[235] Byrn (w) and Lee (a) op cit p. 15

[236] Lobdell (w) and Peterson (a) op cit p. 13

on the character, and placing her in courtship with Gambit, the love story between the two transmits ideas about how men and woman should perform in relationships. To understand female experience, power, and sexuality, the dominant position expects to see it in a binary way. This binary conforms to patriarchal ideas of dominance and dominated. Rogue and Gambit engaging and performing to the Southern Belle codes of courtship and romance, maintain those ideas and transmit their validity.

For Rogue to perform her gender correctly, she must keep her power and her sexuality under control and at the same time, make it available to men. She tells Gambit that to let her power and sexuality out is dangerous: "ah'm so afraid, ah might hurt you."[237] This is a valid fear because of what happened to her boyfriend: "It was the first an' last time ah kissed someone out of passion."[238] In all the retellings of Rogue's origin, she is always the one that initiates that first kiss. She is the one that is sexually aggressive and lets passion take over. That sexual aggression is a transgression to the rules set up by submissive, Southern Belle performance. Whenever Rogue steps too much out of her Southern Belle performance,there are consequences and she is punished. These punishments work to normalize her back to her expected gender performance.

Like fellow female team member Storm, Rogue is eventually given command of her own team of X-Men by Cyclops, the de facto team leader of all of the X-Men. However, to be a team leader is to move outside of the performance of the Southern Belle. A belle is not a leader; she is submissive to male authority. Things go wrong for

---

[237] Fabian Nicieza (w) and Andy Kubert (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #24 (Marvel Comics September 1993) p. 19

[238] ibid p. 19

Rogue as soon as she moves outside of her gender performance. Half of her team defects to the enemy, one teammate dies, and another is put into a coma. Her powers become amplified to the point that she can kill instantly with a touch, causing her to consume and absorb the psyches of eight billion entities.[239]

By defying her expected gender role and letting her powers become unconstrained, Rogue becomes destructive, ineffective, and all-consuming. Without restraint, female power and sexuality becomes too dangerous. Even Cyclops, the voice of patriarchal authority, realizes that giving her a leadership role was wrong: "I was wrong about Rogue…I put her in a role she couldn't handle."[240] To perform femaleness correctly, Rogue must perform the role of the submissive belle. In the world of superhero comics, without the constraint offered by patriarchal dominance, female power and sexuality is dangerous and destructive. By letting her sexuality become unconstrained, Rogue's becomes dangerous. As a young girl she hurt someone she cared about with her unconstrained passion. As an adult, when she tries to step outside of the expected role of her gender, similar misfortune and damage is done. To control her powers and sexuality, they must be constrained by patriarch authority. Eventually, Rogue has her powers controlled and repaired by the ultimate force of X-Men patriarchy, Professor X.

After almost 27 years of publication and only occasionally being able to touch someone, Marvel editorial and creators at the company decided it was finally time to change Rogue and how her powers function. While the editorial and creative reasons for

---

[239] Mike Carey (w) and Chris Bachalo (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #199 (Marvel Comics July 2007)

[240] Mike Carey (w) and Mike Choi (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #204 (Marvel Comics December 2007) p. 10

this narrative change is unclear, the decision to give Rogue control of her powers fit with the the dominant position's expectations of female power and sexuality. Rogue's unchecked power and sexuality are still presented as dangerous and destructive, but patriarchal power and authority can constrain them and help her control them.

Following the events of Rogue's botched time in a leadership role, she makes the decision to isolate herself in the Australian outback where she hopes to figure out her life.[241] However, Rogue, as a belle and female character, is not capable of figuring things out on her own. To control her power and be sexually normalized requires patriarchal authority to intercede. Professor X tracks down Rogue and offers a diagnosis of her underdeveloped powers: "Rogue first used her powers involuntarily. Before they were fully formed, before she could know, or control, what she was doing."[242] Because of her impulsiveness and unconstrained passion, her powers did not develop properly and are broken.. According to Professor X, the same thing happened again when Rogue absorbed all of the life force she could from the Avenger Ms. Marvel.[243] Using her absorbing powers unconstrained and giving into her desires outside of the patriarchal rules set up for the belle, caused her to "paralyze the development of your powers. To freeze them in that nascent stage. They never developed as they were meant to develop."[244] Without patriarchal authority and adhering to her specific gender performance, Rogue's powers and sexuality did not develop correctly. Without patriarchal control of her powers and

---

[241] Carey (w) and Eaton and Checchetto (a) op cit pp. 2-3

[242] Mike Carey (w) and Scot Eaton (a) *X-Men Legacy* Vol. 1 #224 (Marvel Comics July 2009) p. 11

[243] Claremont (w) and Bennett (w) op cit p. 4

[244] Carey (w) and Eaton (a) op cit p. 12

sexuality she becomes separated from normalized sexuality and powers. To repair the damage of her subversion and to normalize her, Professor X needs to fix her.

After rooting around in her mind, Professor X declares her cured and normal. When Rogue questions the effectiveness of his cure by saying, "But ah don't feel any better, any more in control,"[245] Professor X responds, "With respect Rogue, you have no experience of control, and therefore nothing to compare this to."[246] As a proper belle, Rogue has never controlled her power or her sexuality because that is not part of what she is supposed to do. While she has tried to cover up and restrain her powers, controlling her power and sexuality is the provence of male figures. Professor X understands control and can dictate how Rogue uses and constrains her powers and her sexuality. Professor X can understand female power and sexuality, so he is able to help Rogue's mind perceive and understand her power and sexuality For a belle to have her power and sexuality controlled, means she is performing that role correctly and can attract a husband. After giving up control to Professor X so he can fixe and normalize her, Rogue is shown kissing Gambit.(Fig. 30)[247] Like a proper belle, control of Rogue's sexuality is



Fig. 30 Gambit and a normalized Rogue sharing their first kiss

[245] ibid p. 19

[246] ibid p. 19

[247] ibid p. 21

passed from a father figure - Professor X - to a proper gentleman - Gambit.

Rogue's desire to be a sexual being and have a relationship with Gambit is in no way a problematic representation of female power and sexuality. However, Rogue's powers and sexuality have been constrained by the narrative through the rules of the Southern Belle and the gendered performance that it imposes. Her sexuality and power are not autonomous. While she does choose to be sexually restrained and covered because of her power, that restraint is part of what she is expected to be as the angelic, virginal belle. Even restrained, she is denied control and agency when it comes to her sexuality and power. She is dependent on patriarchal authority to constrain and control her powers and normalize her sexually. Her sexuality is only acceptable and valid when constrained by a patriarchal system that makes her power and sexuality submissive to a dominant male power.

While female sexuality itself is not problematic, that sexuality becomes distorted and objectified when it is passed through male expectations and perceptions. Female sexuality that is not submissive to the control of the male gaze and experience, is perceived as out of control and dangerous. Unconstrained female sexuality is feared and a source of dread in patriarchal power structures. Naomi Wolf points out, "Fear of female sexuality is male projections of fear of subversive power."[248] To assuage this fear, female sexuality and power must be shown as passive. If it is not passive it is subversive. Normalized representations of female sexuality need to be represented within a sphere that is defined by the patriarchal control. For the dominant position, female sexuality can

---

[248] Wolf op cit p. 89

only be understood when perceived and observed through the male experience's relationship to it. Female sexuality outside of male constraint and control leads to decentralization of the patriarchal power structure. The anxiety and dread of this potential leads to representations that present unchecked female sexuality as monstrous and destructive. Poison Ivy is an example of the monstrous unconstrained female power and sexuality. However, Ivy is normalized and constrained to passivity and objectification. The dominant reading position expects to see the monstrous feminine controlled, constrained, and punished. A prominent examples of the monstrous feminine being punished is the punishment of Jean Grey after her transformation into the world destroying Dark Phoenix.

Phoenix and Fear of the Female Orgasm

In the late 70s, Original X-Man Jean Grey was given new powers and a new name. As Phoenix, Jean possessed a stronger set of powers and became more sexual. Describing how she felt when she used her new powers, Jean used terms with a more physical and sexual connotation. "My mind burning — so many memories — sensations,"[249] and, "My power, it's hitting me like a drug. I've never felt such, ecstasy."[250] Jean discovering and using her



Fig. 31 Jean Grey tests the limits of her new powers

[249] Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (a) *X-Men* Vol. 1 #101 (Marvel Comics October 1976) p. 10

[250] Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (a) *X-Men* Vol. 1 #105 (Marvel Comics June 1977) p. 26

new powers is like discovering new sexual responses and a new sexual freedom. When she is having the limits of her powers tested, she is asked how using her powers makes her feel. She says, "If anything, it makes me feel good."(Fig. 31)[251] Being more powerful, means Jean Grey is now a more sexual being. As Phoenix, Jean and her new sexuality is acceptable and meets with expectations of female sexual performance. This Jean is in a committed relationship with her teammate, Cyclops, and her powers are constrained by her mentor and X-Men founder, Charles Xavier - Professor X. As a powered and sexual being, she exists in a sphere of male control and constraint. She performs the girlfriend/ wife role with Cyclops and the student/daughter role with Professor X. As long as she submits her power and sexuality to patriarchal control, she is performing femaleness and female sexuality as expected. However, as her power grows and her sexual desires grow, she can no longer be contained by these men. Once she can no longer be constrained or controlled by patriarch authority, she becomes monstrous, evil, and in need of normalization.

As Jean's powers and sexual appetites grow, she is tempted by sexual freedom that is outside the control of Cyclops or Professor X. While using her psychic powers to scan the thoughts of patrons of a seedy disco club, she notes that "Some of the images I'm receiving are so vile…Part of me almost finds those thoughts attractive."[252] In this scene, Jean and Scott wearing their coats and slacks are placed in opposition to the club patrons in their various states of undress as they grope and cavort. The sexuality on

---

[251] Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a) *X-Men* Vol. 1 #125 (Marvel Comics September 1979) p. 2

[252] Claremont (w) and Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* op cit p. 26

display, or vile thoughts that Jean is observing are presented as outside the norm, a dark and forbidden sexuality that the wholesome and angelic Jean should not enjoy. However, this sexuality is something that her growing powers and desires find attractive.

The dichotomy created for Jean of controlled female sexuality and unchecked female sexuality is similar to the whore/madona or angel/monster dichotomies present in Rogue's Southern Belle performance. Jean having her sexuality and power controlled by the men in her life signals a virginal and angelic performance. Jean finds the thoughts of the patrons in the club vile and disgusting. However, as her powers and sexuality grow past the limits of male control, there is part of her that finds their thoughts desirable. This part of Jean is the whore, slut, and monster. It is a power and sexuality that can not be contained by the normative monogamy and gender performance offered by her relationship with Cyclops. When an all-powerful, sexually autonomous Jean is confronted by her father figure, Professor X, he lays out dichotomies as rules to frame her transformation from angel to monster: "Power without restraint, knowledge without wisdom, age without maturity, passion without love."[253] The sexually uncontrolled Jean has plenty of passion, but no restraint; like Rogue and her coma inducing kiss. The narrative presents her as selfish, undisciplined, and in search of new pleasures and sexual gratification. Jean becomes the image of the monstrous feminine as she transforms from Phoenix, to Black Queen, and finally to Dark Phoenix.

As the Black Queen, Jean is sexually aggressive. Her Phoenix costume is replaced with one that consists of a corset, panties, and a cape. The Black Queen also brandishes a

---

[253] ibid p. 145

whip that works as the finishing touch on her new dominatrix style costume.(Fig. 32)[254] Her new appearance is in defiance of sexual hierarchy, and to show she is not subservient to Cyclops and no longer in need of him to provide her with sexual and emotional satisfaction. Surrounded by her new allies, the inner circle of the Hell Fire Club, Cyclops notices that, "Jean's flirting with them all," and that she has "the instincts of a minx."[255] With her sexuality free, Jean flits from man to man. Patriarchal authority and the normative expectations of female performance no longer constrain Jean's sexuality or power.



Fig. 32 Jean Grey the Black Queen in full dominatrix gear

If a woman uses her sexuality to control, manipulate, or dominate men, she is labeled monstrous, subversive, and villainous. With her sexuality uncontrolled, Jean becomes the main villain of the narrative. Even the previous villains, the Hellfire Club, are secondary to her. The telepath, Master Mind, who has been trying to manipulate and control Jean throughout *The Dark Phoenix Saga* is confronted by Jean for his attempts to control and constrain her. In the face of the monstrous Jean, he pleads, "Jean, no more, I beg you! You're killing me!" But Jean, now the villain, responds, "I intend to do a lot

---

[254] ibid p. 32

[255] ibid p. 88 It is possible to see the use of the word "minx" to be an early 80s, comic code approved, version of slut or whore.

worse than that."[256] Instead of killing him, Jean attacks his mind and leaves him a brain dead husk.[257]

Master Mind serves as a potential stand in for the dominant position as he tries to perceive a sexually liberated woman; a task that is presented as unfathomable. A monstrous woman like Jean can only destroy, and leave men drooling husks that would be better dead. However, for the narrative to make Jean as true monster, destroying the the mind of a single villain is not enough, she must do much worse to serve as an appropriate allegory of the destructiveness of uncontrolled female sexuality.

As Dark Phoenix, Jean flies into space and destroys a star in search of her next orgasm. Since her power and sexuality have far outgrown her former relationships and home planet, Jean finds herself near a large sun. Ravenous, she dives into the star and causes it to explode. "And in the center of the super-nova she created, Dark Phoenix thrills to the absolute power that is hers. She is in ecstasy." Furthermore she, "Craves that ultimate sensation and she will pay any price to achieve it once more."[258] While Jean's search for sexual freedom does lead her to destroying a man that tried to constrain her sexuality, orgasm, and the ecstasy that comes with it, it is when she destroys a sun and a planet that "is inhabited, by an ancient, peace-loving civilization,"[259] that she becomes truly monstrous. The image of the planet she destroys shows alien humanoid creatures, some obviously fathers and mothers, holding their frightened children, fearful of the

---

[256] ibid p. 107

[257] ibid p. 108

[258] ibid p. 125

[259] ibid p. 124

exploding light in their sky.[260] This is a fear echoed by the dominant position. If Jean were more passive, submissive, and easily controlled, her sexuality, like all women's unchecked sexuality, would not lead to the destruction of civilizations.

The narrative presents Jean Grey's sexuality as destructive and terrible and gives voice to the anxiety and dread of the patriarchal power structure's perceptions of female sexuality. As a source of anxiety and dread, the expectation is that the narrative will strip Jean of her powers and be punished to reassert male dominance and power. Punishment for Jean means being put on trial. After the destruction of the planet, Jean is brought back to her virginal status when Professor X enters her mind and dampens her powers. As proof of her willingness to have her sexuality and power back under patriarchal control, Jean immediately accepts a marriage proposal from Cyclops.[261]

The virginal Phoenix is normalized to hierarchal structures of male dominance and female submissiveness. As Phoenix, she is ready to be the wife and daughter, which is something that the Black Queen and Dark Phoenix would never do. Jean submits her passions and sexual urges to Cyclops as a husband and lover while her power is constrained by Professor X as her father and mentor. Jean must submit to all patriarchal authority to be put in her proper place within the particular power structure. Though, for this particular narrative, normalization is not enough of a punishment for just how monstrous Jean became. In the very next sequence, Jean and the X-Men are taken by an alien tribunal to be put on trial by combat for the death of five billion people.[262]

---

[260] ibid pp. 124-125

[261] ibid p. 146

[262] ibid p. 150

Though she is no longer Dark Phoenix and has been sexually normalized, Jean admits that the lure of sexual freedom is still there. To be sexually autonomous and in control of her own sexual gratification is too tempting and enticing for Jean.[263] The desire experience what she did as Dark Phoenix transmits a new message about female sexuality and power. Once a women has a taste of sexual autonomy, there is no going back. This communicates the idea that women should not be allowed to indulge in sexual freedom or allowed access to personal, cultural, or sexual power. Access is a slippery slope and an addiction that may turn the angel permanently into a monster. The archaic ideas of women being emotionally unstable and irrational play into the idea that they are also incapable of controlling their desires and passions. Like Rogue's impulsive kiss or succumbing to her sex drive and desire, Jean will inevitably give into her passions and desire for another cosmic orgasm.

Jean admits that even thinking about the sensation of her cosmic orgasm brings back those sensations and a desire to experience them again. "It felt good! I don't want that feeling ever again. And yet I do!"[264] Once she has experienced sexual liberation and a cosmic orgasm, Jean realizes that there is no going back. "Jean to Phoenix to Dark Phoenix, a progression as inevitable as death,"[265] she tells Cyclops. Jean has become too powerful, too sexual, to be controlled by any of the men in her life. Her irrationality and inability to control her own passions means that her sexuality will lead to more death and destruction. The narrative, meeting the expectations of the dominant position, closes off

---

[263] ibid p. 159

[264] ibid p. 159

[265] ibid p. 181

any other possible outcomes except that Jean Grey must die. Even Jean understands the narratives inevitability and the expectations of the dominant position. “It’s better this way. Quick. Clean. Final.”[266] Accepting her punishment, Jean steps in front of an oncoming energy bolt, and is incinerated. For the sexually uncontrolled woman in superhero comics, death, depowering, or constraining are the only inevitable outcomes. For Jean, death and depowering were equal possibilities for her punishment and was decided on by editors and creatives at Marvel Comics.

Four years after the release of the final of *The Dark Phoenix Saga,* an alternate ending was released along with an interview with editors and creators in a special single issue. This was the ending that the creators had originally wanted, but were persuaded to change it at the urging of Marvel editorial.[267] In this version, Jean is not killed, but instead is lobotomized and rendered powerless. The decision to kill Jean, instead of this original ending, was made by then editor Jim Shooter who “felt that there had to be some consequences for the actions. I felt that the way the story was originally designed to end, it did not have enough consequences for what happened.”[268] Depowered or killed, the outcome was the same: the monstrous female, with her unchecked sexuality and power, was punished and any anxiety or dread from the dominant position was assuaged. Examining the treatment of male characters in similar situations is all that is needed to add greater confirmation that female characters, and especially Jean, are punished and normalized in this way.

---

[266] ibid p. 182

[267] Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a) *Phoenix: The Untold Story* (Marvel Comics April 1984) p. 1

[268] ibid p. 43

In the 2012 event series *Avengers vs. X-Men,* or *AVX* , the powerful Phoenix Force that had been at the heart of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, returns to Earth and empowers a number of mutants including Cyclops. Throughout the series, Cyclops works to consolidate all of the Phoenix power into himself, defeats and imprisons the Avengers, and to shape the world into a mutant utopia.[269] As powerful as Jean was, Cyclops becomes Dark Phoenix. Just like Jean Cyclops becomes the villain of the narrative and kills his father figure, Charles Xavier. [270] After endorsing war, genocide, and committing patricide, Cyclops is simply defeated, imprisoned, and then escapes to continue as the lead in a monthly series as opposed to Jean, who remained dead for six years.[271]

For Dark Phoenix Jean, and her uncontrolled power and sexuality, the only outcomes are death or complete loss of power. For Dark Phoenix Cyclops and his cosmic power and sexuality, a simple return to status quo is in order. Yes, Cyclops is depowered from his cosmic status as the Dark Phoenix, but he still retains his mutant optic blasts and is returned to a leadership role. In the version of her narrative where Jean is depowered and lobotomized, no remnants of her mutant abilities remain as she becomes the passive, submissive house wife. Both Jean and Cyclops are returned to normalized roles and performances based on their genders. The default status of men is to be active, in control, and powerful, where the default nature of women is to be passive, submissive, and

---

[269] Jason Aaron, Brian Michael Bendis, Ed Brubaker, Matt Fraction, and Jonathan Hickman (w) and Oliver Coipel, Andy Kubert, and John Romita (a) *Avengers Vs. X-Men* #01-#12 (Marvel Comics June-December 2012)

[270] Brian Michael Bendis (w) Oliver Coipel (a) *Avengers Vs. X-Men* #11 (Marvel Comics November 2012) pp. 25-26

[271] Resurrection is an inevitable part of superhero comics. Having characters brought back or returned to their status quo is an expected trope in the narrative. However, Jean has experienced a far greater number of deaths and resurrections than the average superhero.

powerless. The expectation within the narrative and outside of it, is that for women to be powered is the exception, not the norm. To unleash cosmic power and destruction and to be sexual beings is the expected performance for male characters, but one of the most grievous and subversive acts a female character can commit.

The Consuming Nature of Female Sexuality

Dark Phoenix, much like Rogue and Poison Ivy, has her uncontrolled sexuality and power compared to an insatiable hunger. As Dark Phoenix says before consuming a sun, "I'm ravenous…I need sustenance."[272] The reader is informed by captions that the sun she dives into "is suddenly, completely, consumed by Dark Phoenix."[273] All three of these characters and the comparisons to their powers and sexuality as being able to consume come from different time periods and across different publishers. Wether it is Poison Ivy's devouring, Rogue's swallowing, or Dark Phoenix's consuming, a specific paradigmatic choice is being made in using this terminology when talking about these women, their powers, and their sexuality.

For long time comic readers and fans, the act of consuming and devouring has a villainous and negative connotation. Most notably, the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created cosmic force and villain Galactus has been a constant in Marvel Comics over the last 50 plus years. Galactus, the Devourer of Worlds, is a being who travels across the cosmos in search of planets to consume so that he can satiate his unending hunger. On multiple

---

[272] Claremont (w) and Byrne (a) *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga* op cit p. 124

[273] ibid p. 125

occasions he has tried to consume earth and is stopped by the Fantastic Four[274]or Thor.[275] Galactus' need to consume is attached to destruction. This is a common theme in much of literature. From vampires to zombies, the unending drive to consume is connected with destruction and villains. To control the need to consume is a mark of heroism. The Marvel characters Blade and Morbius are both vampiric in nature, but are able to control those drives and instead fight evil. At the same time, those who can not control their consuming drives become the villains of the narrative.

Rogue is able to maintain her role as a hero because she is able to control her consuming power and sexuality by covering herself up. Rogue's Southern Belle performance also works to constrain her power and sexuality. However, Poison Ivy and Jean do not try to control their desire and consuming drive which makes them villains and sources of destruction. The image of uncontrolled power and sexuality are presented as dangerous, consuming, and destructive. This plays into a larger discourse and apparatus of how patriarchal cultures have tried to diagnose, constrain, and define female sexuality in the real world.

Rogue's performance as a Southern Belle is constructed through repetitive acts that reflect a larger system of maintaining gender binaries and power structures. The perception of female power and sexuality as a consuming and destroying force is a gender reality that has coalesced through repetition over years. We can see these ideas played out as far back as the 19th century in the way female diseases like hysteria and

---

[274] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a) *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1 #50 (Marvel Comics May 1966)

[275] Jason Aaron (w) and Esad Ribic (a) *Thor: God of Thunder* #23 (Marvel Comics August 2014)

nymphomania were understood, diagnosed, and treated. “The term nymphomania resonates with a sense of the insatiable sexuality of women, devouring, depraved, diseased. It conjures up an aggressively sexual female who both terrifies and titillates men.”[276] Within patriarchal power structures, female sexuality must be constantly available to men, but only when men approach or require it. Otherwise, female sexuality must be contained and constrained. This control often takes the shape of expected gender roles, cultural restrictions, or the direct intercession of male power and authority. Constructions of female sexuality dictate that women are “supposed to be naturally modest and sexually passive (although not passionless), awaiting the awakening of desire in response to the approaches of men.”[277] Like the the set of rules placed on southern women and on the performance of Rogue as a character, women are not expected to be perpetually asexual. However, their sexuality should be able to be turned on and off by male authority.

Rogue’s power and sexuality is constantly on. She can restrain it by wearing gloves and avoiding physical contact, but it is never under control. For Ivy and Jean, their powers are out of control, the women dictate when they are sexual and when they are not, and they do not need men around to be sexual and powerful beings. These characters are all portrayed as subversive or transgressive to expected performances and definitions of femaleness. Within patriarchal power structures, femaleness needs to be defined as fixed and static even though in reality, femaleness is as arbitrary as any other sign. The unstable

---

[276] Carol Groneman “Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality” *Signs* Vol. 19 No. 2 (University of Chicago Press 1994) p. 337

[277] ibid p. 342

and fluid nature of femaleness is frightening and dangerous to the patriarchal power structure. The dominant position needs to be assured by representations within the narrative, that female power and female sexuality is controlled and constrained, which reflects a desire for how the culture outside of the narrative should also function.

The fear of female sexuality and power is best assuaged with representations of control and constraint. In early attempts to understand and constrain female sexuality to patriarchal power structures, diagnoses like nymphomania and hysteria were used to mark women whose gendered and sexual performance were transgressive to the cultural norm. Specifically, "The concept of nymphomania constructs a female sexuality that is totally out of control, both literally and figuratively…out of the control of their husbands, fathers, and doctors; and out of the control of the 'natural laws' that supposedly determined women's passive response to male desire."[278] Once male authority can not control a woman's power and sexuality, it becomes a disease and is marked as dangerous.

During Jean's transformation to Dark Phoenix, she grows out of the control of her potential husband Cyclops and her father figure Professor X. She becomes dangerous and gives in to the all consuming nature of her sexuality and power. If Batman, the doctors, and guards do not keep Poison Ivy in check, her power and sexuality become evil, destructive, and out of control. Without that control, she would have easily consumed Detective Stewart, something she started to do when she kissed him. The similarities between the way women used to be diagnosed with nymphomania and the diagnoses applied to both Jean and Ivy are striking.

---

[278] ibid p. 342

In diagnosing and evaluating the symptoms and effects of nymphomania, many doctors at the time pointed out that these women were "in a condition of ungovernable sexual excitement,"[279] and that their sexuality "burned with such intensity that it very nearly wrecked the physical well being."[280] For Jean, Ivy, and Rogue, their powers and their sexual desires are ungovernable, and that ungovernability will lead to the wrecking and destroying of not only patriarchal power, but also life. Jean's excitement destroys a sun and planet, Rogue's touch consumes billions of entities, and Poison Ivy has wrecked unknown numbers of men. Without control and constraint, not only can woman be a danger to themselves, but also to the world.

Some of the earliest medical theories regarding nymphomania and other female specific ailments claimed that untreated maladies could lead to some form of insanity or mental break. "If she continued in her present habits of indulgence…it would probably become necessary to send her to an asylum."[281] In these earlier theories, there was a direct correlation between uncontrolled female sexuality and mental health. While these theories have been scientifically disproven and no longer part of modern medical diagnosis, the ideas and perceptions of female sexuality that they formed still exist in how that sexuality is perceived through a male-centric lens.

Poison Ivy giving in to her habits and indulgences is literally held and kept in an asylum to keep her powers and sexuality from wreaking havoc across Gotham. In the

---

[279] John Tompkins Walton "Case of Nymphomania Successfully Treated" *American Journal of Medical Science* Vol. 33 No. 1 (1857) p. 47

[280] L.M. Phillips "Nymphomania; Reply to Questions" *Cincinnati Medical Journal* Vol. 10 No. 7 (1895) p. 468

[281] Horatio Storer "Cases of Nymphomania" *American Journal of Medical Science* Vol. 32 No. 10 (1856) p. 385

original final to the Dark Phoenix Saga and Rogue's narrative arc, the cure involves having their brains invaded and tampered with. Rogue's power is only put in check after Professor X dives into her mind and arranges it the way it is supposed to be.[282] Jean undergoes a psychic lobotomy that disconnects her from her powers. As the caption box says, "excise those parts of her brain which relate to her mutant abilities."[283] All of these women, in one way or another, have their subversive actions and transgression connected to notions of uncontrolled female power and sexuality and mental problems and development. Jean's lobotomy though is particularly significant when compared to how extreme cases of nymphomania use to be treated.

The theories that female diseases and issues all stemmed from the female reproductive organs created the belief that removal of those organs would cure diseases like nymphomania. Because of this, women diagnosed with extreme cases of nymphomania would undergo oophorectomy (the removal of ovaries) or excision of the clitoris or labia.[284] Literally, these women separated from what was perceived as the source of their sex drive and maternal power. For Jean, her psychic lobotomy works in much the same way because it separates her from what is perceived as the source of her sexuality and power. "When every aspect, every pathway of the fantastic neural network that comprises Jean's psionic talent has been charted - down to sub-atomic levels - the psychic surgery begins. One by one -an atom here, a strand of molecules there - those

---

[282] Carey (w) and Eaton (a) op cit pp. 13-17

[283] Claremont (w) and Byrne (a) *Phoenix: The Untold Story* op cit p. 31

[284] Groneman op cit p. 349

pathways are burned away."[285] Jean, like patients diagnosed with nymphomania, is forced to undergo a surgery to normalize her sexuality and power.

At no time is it assumed that the writers and artists of these comics and narratives were drawing specific parallels to, or promoting, the diagnoses of nymphomania or the treatments used by early doctors. However, cultural structures, expectations, and definitions that dictated femaleness and how female sexuality should be perceived are systems that still function and maintain patriarchal control of female power and sexuality. These constant affirmations and repetitions of patriarchal authority work to assuage fears of subversion and transgression against gendered performances while maintaining a warning that without this control and constraint, female power and sexuality could at any moment consume us all and destroy the world and culture we inhabit.

Female characters' powers and sexual desires are constrained by specific ideas and expectations of how female power and sexuality are performed. For female sexuality and power to be performed correctly, it must be subject to the rules of the patriarchal power structure. Their power must be dependent on, or submissive to, already existing patriarchal power. If it is not constrained and female sexuality and power moves outside of patriarchal control, it is presented as monstrous, and the female character needs to be normalized. She-Hulk, Poison Ivy, Rogue, and Jean Grey have all been subject to attempts to reassert patriarchal power and dominance. All of these attempts have been used at one time or another to bring the most famous and longest running female superhero, Wonder Woman, in line with the expectations of the dominant reading

---

[285] Claremont (w) and Byrne (a) *Phoenix: The Untold Story* op cit p. 32

position. Over the course of almost 75 years of publication, Wonder Woman has been depowered, repowered, objectified, sexualized, retconned, and redesigned all in attempts to present her constrained, normalized, and performing female power and female sexuality correctly.

She's a Wonder, Wonder Woman

In William Moulton Marston's[286] original conception of Wonder Woman, she is born on Paradise Island, the home of a female only society known as the Amazons. Because there were no men on the island, sexuality was female owned and defined. Much of how Marston constructed the mythology of Wonder Woman and her island were metaphors for a female dominant culture and female dominance within sexual hierarchies. Paradise Island was a matriarchal utopia where it was believed and taught that male influence would corrupt the island and the perfect, peaceful society that the Amazonians created.

Inspired by the suffragist era, Marston envisioned a world were female power could be channeled into the political and economic realm. Though their progressed had been stymied by the depression, the 30s were a decade where first wave feminist ideas finally seemed to be bearing fruit. Marston watched as Margret Sengar had successfully advocated for the legalization of birth control and Roosevelt's New Deal drawn in an unprecedented number of women into government. Women suddenly seemed to have not only more power, but more choice. All of this worked to inspire Marston's utopian world view and the construction of Wonder Woman.

---

[286] Marston is best known to comic scholars and historians as Charles Moulton, the pen name he used as the creator and writer of Wonder Woman.

Marston believed that the coming age would be an "American Matriarchy" where "Women would take over the rule of the country, politically and economically."[287] Marston also advocated a reversal of gender binaries and a reevaluation of how gender roles were understood and enforced. For Marston, women needed to become more dominant while men needed to be submissive. "Give men an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they'll be proud to become her willing slaves."[288] Marston theorized that men were more suited to passive gender roles, but culture was forcing them to act differently. With the right influence, and the right woman, men would quickly adapt to their new roles within a matriarchy.

The idea of submission, and female dominant sexuality and power became major motifs within Wonder Woman. Marston saw comics as the perfect medium for his stories and ideas; he said, "if children will read comics…why isn't it advisable to give them some constructive comics to read?"[289] To communicate his ideas of dominant and submissive, Marston's early issues were filled with bondage motifs and it was revealed that a popular game on Paradise Island



Fig. 33 Wonder Woman and Amazonian binding games

[287] Les Daniels *Wonder Woman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000) p. 19

[288] Michelle R. Finn "William Marston's Feminist Agenda" *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times* Edited by Joseph J. Darowski (North Caroline: Jefferson, 2014) p. 14

[289] Daniels op cit p. 12

was for the women to chase after and tie each other up.(Fig. 33)[290] However, as the major comic publishers began to cultivate and deliver to their perceived male dominant audience, references to these games and a male absent sexuality began to disappear. Stories of Wonder Woman as a warrior saving men and women from danger became romance stories where she was more concerned with her boyfriend than anything else.[291] These stories started to reflect more traditional ideas and gender roles of women. Her relationship with Steve Trevor shifted from a dominant Wonder Woman to a dominant Steve.(Fig. 34)[292] Wonder Woman's dominant, aggressive sexuality and power was frightening and disturbing to patriarchal powers structures. Her subversive and transgressive representation opposed traditional and conservative ideas of how woman should act. Wonder Woman's non-normative gender performance and sexuality were so frightening and subversive, they earned their own special mention and attention by psychiatrist and activist, Dr. Fredric Wertham. Wonder Woman and her group of female sidekicks, the Holliday Girls, drew specific ire in his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*.



Fig. 34 Wonder Woman saving Steve trevor to being saved by him

Along with blaming most

---

[290] Tim Hanley *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014) p. 50

[291] ibid p. 147

[292] William Moulton Marston (w) and Harry G. Peter (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 1 #5 (DC Comics: July 1943), Robert Kanigher (w) and Harry G. Peter (a) *Sensation Comics* Vol. 1 #94 (DC Comics: October 1949) Covers

juvenile delinquency on comics, Wertham directly pointed to Batman and Wonder Woman as advocates for gay and lesbian lifestyles. He noted that Wonder Woman was dominant instead of submissive and asserted that "Neither folklore nor normal sexuality, nor books for children, come about this way. If it were possible to translate a cardboard figure like Wonder Woman into life, every normal-minded young man would know there is something wrong with her."[293] Wertham insisted that since Wonder Woman was not sexually submissive she was not normal. This was an idea that was culturally prevalent during the early 1950s when *Seduction of the Innocent* was published and the comic book hearings in the senate were part of American political discourse.

If culture as a whole saw "normal" female power and sexuality as submissive, then the male centric reading position that was being cultivated by comic publishers felt much the same way. Uncontrolled female power and sexuality like Wonder Woman's was abnormal and potentially monstrous. Wertham insisted, "For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image."[294] If Wonder Woman was seen as a frightening image for boys, and boys were part of the dominant reading position that comics were starting to cultivate, then she needed to be normalized to be less frightening and to reflect a more acceptable performance of femaleness.

Wonder Woman eventually had to be normalized, punished, and reimagined as more culturally acceptable. In 1968, as the move to a male gendered reading position and the logonomic system that would help meet its expectations solidified, Wonder Woman

---

[293] Wertham op cit p. 235

[294] ibid p. 193

was depowered. Instead of her superhuman strength, bullet deflecting bracelets, and lasso of truth, Wonder Woman was stripped belongings, given a high-end clothing boutique to run, and trained in martial arts by a male kung fu master.[295] Like Jean Grey who was a symbol of female sexuality without male control, Wonder Woman's power and sexuality had to be normalized within a patriarchal power structure. Instead of coming from women, her power came from a wise old man and instead of the identity of Wonder Woman, she was reborn as Diana Prince and her identity defining powers became dependent on male authority. However, even with her punishment, Wonder Woman was still defined by the cannon and continuity formed by Marston. That original version of Wonder Woman was also the iconic version that leaders of the women's liberation movement of the 70s had grown up idealizing. Thanks in part to those women, the depowered, male-trained Wonder Woman returned to her former status and power.

The impetus for Wonder Woman getting her powers back was not because of a dogged connection to the cannon built by Marston or the normal corrective forces of the logonomic system. The return to her powered self started with an organized campaign that culminated with an article written by feminist and activist, Gloria Steinem. This campaign started in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine.* The cover famously carried an image



Fig. 35 "Wonder Woman for President" on the cover of *Ms. Magazine*

[295] Hanley op cit pp. 171-172

of the original and iconic Wonder Woman and a banner advocating, "Wonder Woman for President."(Fig. 35)[296] The article compared the depowering of Wonder Woman in comics with the attempts by American culture at the time to depower women.[297] Steinem, a fan of the Wonder Woman of her youth, made the connection between the taking away of a superhero's powers with limiting them, and in particular, constraining the gender that the hero represented. The controversy that Steinem's article created, in light of the power and energy behind the women's movement of the time, prompted DC to restore Wonder Woman's god-like powers.

Even the writer of this change in Wonder Woman's status quo, Dennis O'Neil, has since admitted that Steinem's reading was valid and he just did not understand the implications of the narrative change. "Boy did I screw up. I took the feminist icon and depowered her. Then made her mentor a male."[298] O'Neil's comments highlight the fact that constrained representations are not necessarily a conscious effort by the creators. However as these decisions become ingrained and expected, they appear innocuous, but they are systemically part of the tropes and expectations of the genre. Wonder Woman in particular reflects this in how her powers and sexuality are treated and represented. As the artist Phil Jimenez, an out gay comic artist who has worked on Wonder Woman books, has said, "Wonder Woman is a classic exercise in watching how men, through the

---

[296] Mary Thom *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement* (New York: H. Holt, 1997) p. 9

[297] ibid pp. 211-213

[298] Dennis O'Neil *Secret Origin: The Story of DC Comics* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010)

decades, are trying to handle the ideas of women and equality."[299] Wonder Woman, like all superheroes, works as a cipher for perceptions and ways of seeing. For Wonder Woman, changes like her depowering in the 60s can be seen as a cultural reaction to the women's movement and the movement's effect on expected gender roles and traditional patriarchal power structures.

By the 60s, women's perceived potential as an audience and a significant position within the comics field was greatly diminished. The perceived hetero-male audience had been cultivated, and their rewarding of comics publishers had intrenched a dominant position. If Wonder Woman had not been one of Steinem's heroes growing up, the depowering of Wonder Woman could still be how the character is represented today. However, once the controversy died down, DC could go back to meeting the expectations of their dominant reading position. Specifically, in 1985, DC Comics rebooted their entire line of comics (the first of a number of reboots and relaunches at the publisher). *Crisis on Infinite Earths* selectively erased much of DC Comic's convoluted or subversive history, and was given a new history, cannon, and continuity.[300] This new status quo for the shared universe of their characters was coded more specifically to the expectations of the dominant reading position.

As a dynamic system, the logonomic system needs to perpetuate itself and reassert the dominance of the target audience and reading position in spaces that it could not inject itself into before. With this massive relaunch, a male-centric reading position

---

[299] Phil Jimenez "Great Power, Great Responsibility" *Superheroes a Never-Ending Battle* (PBS October 15 2013)

[300] Marv Wolfman (w) and George Perez (a) *Crisis On Infinite Earths* (New York: DC Comics, 2001)

could be reactivated and producers could influence a new history and continuity that would transmit the expected meaning of power and sexuality along the logonomic system. The binding games and female centric sexuality of Wonder Woman were replaced by a more passive/objective type of sexuality that is focused around male experience. As the expectations of the dominant position began to influence the Wonder Woman narrative, she began to mirror the male-constrained and controlled form of female sexuality.

These changes peaked in the 1990s run of Wonder Woman when aspects of her superhero identity were altered to match new expectations. In the 60s these changes meant wearing mod style cloths and going by Diana Prince. In the 90s these changes lead to a revealing costume and the loss of the title Wonder Woman.(Fig. 36)[301] Instead of the star-spangled shorts and red and gold top, she was given a short jacket and a black strap bra outfit that exposed more of her body. Since they had already tried once to punish her by depowering her, this time her body was exposed and she was placed in more sexually suggestive posses. This put Wonder Woman more in line with the expectations of the newly reactivated male dominant position, presenting her so that she was more sexually objectified. By reveling more skin, cleavage, and body, Wonder



Fig. 36 Wonder Woman's 90s stvle

[301] William Messner-Loebs (w) and Mike Deodato Jr. (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 2 #91-#93 (DC Comics November 1994 - January 1995)

Woman became more about a sexuality that was centered in being seen by a male gaze. But like her depowering in the 60s, this reimagining of Wonder Woman did not last long.

While the ’68, ’85 and ‘95 shifts in Wonder Woman’s continuity allowed the logonomic system to transmit at least a small bit of expected meaning to the dominant reading position, many of those changes never stuck. Wonder Woman was still a female character from an island of women who were outside the constraint and control of patriarchal power structures. With another reboot and relaunch in 2011, DC Comics’ New 52 did not just streamline and alter small segments of Wonder Woman’s continuity; they attempted to erase it all and start from scratch. Leaving enough to be familiar to long time readers, Wonder Woman’s sexually liberated female home and her exclusively matriarchal creation were reshaped as patriarchally dependent. Her home became an example of uncontrolled female power and sexuality as the monstrous feminine.

The Monstrous Amazon

In the opening arc of her New 52 series Wonder Woman visits Hephaestus, the Greek god of smiths and craftsmen, hoping to get weapons to help in her battle. While at his forge, Wonder Woman learns how monstrous an island of sexually liberated women can be. In order to continue the line of Amazons, the women of Paradise Island go on raids where they board ships, seduce the men, have sex, and then slaughter everyone on board. The concept of naked and sexually willing women showing up and then in the moment of post orgasmic bliss turning to slaughter is a thing of nightmares for the dominant reading position. The panels that use one of these raids as a backdrop present the reactions that the dominant position should have to the situation. In the second panel,

which is placed in the center of the page and is wider than any of the other panels shows an orgy of epic proportions. Naked Amazons are shown astride men, slithering across the boat, aggressively taking control sexually. Only one of the sailor's faces can be seen and is rendered smiling and happy. The inset text box voices the expected reaction to the scene: "It must seem like a dream to most men, beautiful women, offering themselves."[302] The next two panels flip the situation. In panel three, the focus is on the men's faces and their looks of fear, surprise, and horror in response to the swords and spears surrounding them. The final panel shows the bodies of the dead sailors being tossed overboard into the ocean. "But it quickly turns to a nightmare. Their lives, drained from them."(Fig. 37)[303] Like the inevitable slaughter and destruction associated with Jean Grey's uncontrolled search for her orgasm, the Amazons' raids and search for sexual partners fulfillment lead to a massive slaughter.



Fig. 37 The consequences of Amazonian sexuality

Like the previous examples looking at uncontrolled female sexuality, the Amazons are also consumers, swallowers, and drainers. This reinforces the idea that without patriarchal authority in some form or apparatus, female sexuality and power is uncontrolled and there will be

---

[302] Brian Azzarello (w) and Cliff Chiang (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #7 (DC Comics May 2012) p. 13

[303] ibid p. 13

nothing to stop them from consuming all of mankind. The narrative creates an ideal that without men to control or constrain female sexuality, it will grow uncontrollable, dangerous, and ultimately deadly. Without that control, women will no longer adhere to their expected gender roles and become dangerously transgressive and subversive, denying what is considered their intrinsic nature, to be objectified and sexualized whores or loving and maternal madonnas.

Along with learning that her home island is inhabited by a tribe of murdering, pseudo-rapists, Wonder Woman learns from her time with Hephaestus that the Amazons systematically cut out any presence of maleness denying any space or place for male power or authority. Beyond slaughtering the fathers of their future children, the Amazons are shown weeding out the young boys they give birth to and trading them as slaves to Hephaestus in exchange for weapons. "Nine months later, some celebrate the birth of a daughter, some don't."[304] The way the Amazons treat their children illustrates a perversion of the maternal instinct and what female sexuality can become without patriarchal authority to control it.

The absence of patriarchal power and control of the Amazons' lives, culture, and sexuality leads to worse and worse atrocities. The Amazons have perverted the maternal role that is prescribed to female gender performance. The Amazons are made to appear inhuman, sadistic, and murderous in their drive for a matriarchal society. They have rebelled against the normal expectations of performance that is prescribed to their gender, and have become evil. The new Wonder Woman is presented in contrast to the monstrous

---

[304] ibid p. 14

feminine of her Amazonian sisters by being reimagined as compliant to the requirements of patriarchal power. Her power is dependent on male control and even her birth is reinvented from its matriarchal origin. Instead of being a clay statue brought to life by three goddesses or the product of one of the Amazonian rape raids, this new Wonder Woman is the daughter of Zeus and The queen of the Amazons. If Wonder Woman had been born to an Amazon and a sailor, she would be without power. Because her father is a god, she is a demigod by virtue of male power and authority. Because of her male-dependent powers, Wonder Woman can stand in judgment of the other Amazons. This moves the narrative and the character in line with the expectations of the dominant reading position and gives the assurance that the narrative will lead to the Amazons of Paradise Island being punished and constrained. The dread embodied by them and their murderous sexuality will be tempered and removed as a potential threat to sexual hierarchy and normative gender roles. The narrative works to assure the dominant position that the fear and horror seen on the faces of the sailors are something that the dominant position never has to worry about.

Before discovering their monstrous sexuality, Wonder Woman finds all of the inhabitants of Paradise Island transformed into snakes, and her mother turned to stone.[305] Though this transformation occurs before Wonder Woman find out about the raids, it retroactively frames the punishment and transformation as just and fitting. This connection is strengthened by the fact that these transformations are a punishment from the goddess Hera after she learns that her husband Zeus slept with the Amazonian Queen.

---

[305] Brian Azzarello (w) and Cliff Chiang (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #04 (DC Comics February 2012)

The sexual hierarchy at work on the male absent island is presented as deserving of being punished. Zeus, as a male character can not be held responsible for his adultery because that blame falls squarely on the sexually uncontrolled Amazon Queen.

Through the lens of male experience, a place like Paradise Island should not be able to exist. Within the narrative, the island has traditionally been a space where little to no male experience occurs. For the island to be truly normalized and the Amazons to be properly chastised, they must fully accept and take part in their prescribed role as mothers. They must be normalized to their gendered performance. This constraining and normalization also works to remove the matriarchal and female only nature of the island. With her sisters returned to human form, Wonder Woman decrees that the exiled boys be allowed to return and live on the island.[306] The once exclusively female space becomes normalized to patriarchal understandings of culture. With men on the island, it meets the expectations of what a hegemonic culture with discrete gender, looks like. Wonder Woman brings back a patriarchal role and male presence to normalize the Amazons and make them less monstrous. As Wonder Woman says, holding up another illegitimate son of Zeus, "I ask you all to become mothers to this child."[307] To assuage the fear and dread embodied by Paradise Island, the women of the island must perform their expected gender roles. In this case, they need to stop being warriors and murderers and become mothers. Their powers must be transformed from warrior powers to maternal powers.

---

[306] Brian Azzarello (w) and Goran Sudzuka (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #31 (DC Comics June 2014) p. 19

[307] Brian Azzarello (w) and Goran Sudzuka (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #30 (DC Comics June 2014) p. 17

As the image of feminist power and authority, Wonder Woman becomes the voice of patriarchal authority instead of resistance to hegemonic gender performances. The normalized genders in this Wonder Woman narrative have finally started to shift away from Marston's original idea of a matriarchal utopia where women could exist without patriarchal control or interference. The women are default monogamous and men can be sexually aggressive without the fear of being murdered afterwards. Zeus is coded with particular expectation of masculinity. He is virile, sexually desirable, and sexually successful. Within the first arc of the series, the reader is introduced to three women he has slept with, all of whom he has impregnated.

Monogamy and Female Sexuality

In patriarchal understanding of sexuality, monogamy does not correspond with masculinity. However, monogamy is an important aspect of normalized femininity and female sexual performance. Zeus can not be punished for adultery because that is a normal part of male performance. The more sexual partners he has, the more masculine he appears. Women, however, can be punished for taking part in adultery because it is transgressive to the female performance. Wonder Woman's mother is punished for sleeping with Zeus and is irreversibly turned to stone.[308] Jean Grey was marked as transgressive when she opposed the monogamy offered by her relationship to Cyclops. She-Hulk is marked as a slut for her sexual promiscuity, and Poison Ivy is a dangerous femme fatal whose promiscuity is destroying men. Rogue is required by her performance as a Southern Belle, to have her sexuality constrained into an exclusively monogamous

---

[308] Azzarello (w) and Chiang (a) *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #04 op cit pp. 11, 20

lens. Though she does have brief dalliances with Magneto, it is expected that she will return to be with Gambit. The Amazons finding random sailers they sleep with and then murder are also transgressive to the monogamous requirement of female performance. The monogamous female in comics is coded as the virgin and sexually submissive to one man.

The powered male superhero is representative of freedom to move outside the norm and to not be tied down as he finds multiple partners and sexual conquest.[309] Though many superheroes have been married or had steady girlfriends, these relationships are often doomed. Batman can not be with Catwoman,[310] Jean Grey dies again and again, but is faithful to Cyclops even after he cheats on her. Jean goes so far as to endorse Cyclops new relationship with Emma Frost, a relationship started in infidelity while she and Cyclops were still married. As Jean Grey dies once again, she tells Cyclops, "I haven't seen you so alive for a long time Scott…Live Scott. Live. All I ever did was die on you."[311] Other marriages are just erased or retconned out of existence like Spider-Man's marriage to Marry Jane. That marriage is retroactively erased by the devil-like being Mephisto,[312] and even Superman and Lois Lane's longtime marriage was erased from existence with the relaunch of the New 52. Virtually all marriages were

---

[309] Bukatman op cit p. 114

[310] Jeph Loeb (w) and Jim Lee (a) *Batman: Hush* (New York: DC Comics, 2009)

[311] Grant Morrison (w) and Phil Jimenez (a) *New X-Men* #150 (Marvel Comics February 2006) p. 31

[312] J. Michael Straczynski (w) and Joe Quesada (a) *Spider-Man: One More Day* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008)

erased when the DC Comics line was rebooted in 2011 because of editorial's marriage ban.[313]

Removing these relationships adds to the freedom that the male characters have while leaving the apparatus that expects female characters to maintain a mostly monogamous existence intact. Not only are male characters given the freedom associated with their powers, but also sexual freedom. Monogamy, and the commitment that is associated with it, would only serve to trap the uber masculine heroes. Female heroes, however, are only allowed the illusion of sexual freedom and choice. Their sexuality is constrained and reserving for male consumption and viewing. While female characters are allowed some of the freedoms associated with powers, their sexual freedom is hampered. Monogamy is the default status and choice of these women, even if that is monogamous relationships with nothingness.

Male heroes are able to express their virility and sexuality when these relationships are erased or destroyed. Female characters die, but men carry on, date, and have new sexual conquests. Without a relationship between him and Catwoman, Batman moves to Talia al Ghul, Jezebel Jet, and Jaina Hudson. Catwoman goes back to crime. Even after Superman and Louis Lane's marriage was retconned away, his identities as Clark Kent and Superman is seen in relationships with other women, including a huge announcement and PR push highlighting his relationship with Wonder Woman.[314] This

---

[313] Susana Polo "Didio Attempts to Explain DC's Marriage Ban" *The Marry Sue* (12 Sept. 2013) < http://www.themarysue.com/dc-comics-no-marriage/>

[314] Vaneta Rogers "Lois & Clark Never Likely to Date in New 52" *Newsarama* (22 Aug 2012) < http://www.newsarama.com/10052-lois-clark-never-likely-to-date-in-new-52-says-ap.html>

choice places Wonder Woman even more into a dominated and subversive role. Lois Lane, however, is shown single and obsessed with work.

If women are given sexual freedom and allowed to have their sexual lives and powers without the direction or control of male characters, the potential for these women is dangerous. As illustrated by Jean Grey as the Dark Phoenix, Poison Ivy outside of Arkham Asylum, the Amazon's Paradise Island, or Rogue without her gloves, when men are not in positions to control or constrain female sexuality and power, the outcome is frightening. When women have powers and a sexual identity outside of monogamy and other constraints of patriarchal authority, they are marked dangerous and monstrous. The cliched definer of the most prominent femme fatales and villains in superhero comics is the appearance of sexual promiscuity and unchecked power.

To have normalized powers and a sexual identity, female characters need to be presented performing to the expectations of the dominant reading position. Without their powers and sexuality normalized to those expectations, these female characters are subject to being depowered or destroyed. Without their powers they are no longer allowed access to the superhero world, they lose costumes and end up losing their identity. Where male power is limitless and full of potential, female power is limited and constrained by the expectations of the dominant reading position.

Within superhero narratives, female power and female sexuality is expected to be presented and shown as controlled and constrained by patriarchal power. These representations reflect already existing ideas of patriarchal control and constraint that exist outside of the comic in the real world and culture of the dominant reading position.

These controls and constraints reflect already existing ideas and apparatus of control such as cultural requirements like the myth of the Southern Belle, or stigmatization and medical diagnosis of female sexuality. These constraints are also rooted in ideas that all power comes from male power and authority, that the default nature of men is to be powerful, and women require male authority to become powerful. When superhero narratives do not show female power and sexuality controlled and constrained, they work allegorically to present that uncontrolled power and sexuality as dangerous, swallowing, consuming, and monstrous. Uncontrolled female power and sexuality is portrayed as dangerous and in constant need of control by patriarchal power.

Because of the constrained roles and limited possibles of women within patriarchal systems, it is expected that women apply their power and sexuality to patriarchal approved roles and performances. These roles tend to fall within the madonna/whore or angel/monster dichotomies. If the female characters are not exclusively sexualized and objectified whores, then they need to fit into the madonna role of chaste girlfriends and mothers. To become a mother, is one of the few uses of female sexuality approved by the patriarchy. Motherhood, child bearing and rearing, and maternal instincts are all signs of proper female gendered performance. Patriarchy ignores the fact that women may have different goals, voices, or lack any desire to become a mother. Instead, the assumption is that the ultimate use for female sexuality is to satiate the sexual drives of men, or to get pregnant and have children. They also assume that all women are preprogrammed as mothers from conception. To deny what is perceived as intrinsic aspects of femaleness is to transgress or subvert femaleness and it's expected

performance. To deny or incorrectly perform motherhood is to become monstrous and to misuse their sexuality. For the new Amazons of DC Comics, the denying of their maternal instincts is just another indication that Paradise Island is a frighting place. A place that actively tires to deny discrete genders and remove any chance for patriarchal control or influence.

Chapter 5 - Body/Costume

Of all the tropes, cliches, formulas, and trappings that go into the superhero genre of comics, the superhero costume is the most recognizable. Male, female, young, or old, within the context of superheroes, the costume functions as a sign that marks heroes (and villains) as separate from the normal, every day people who inhabit these fictional worlds. Costumes become a way for the reader to identify a particular character quickly. It is within the iconic nature of the costume that iconic solidarity is first grounded. The unique colors, silhouette, and accoutrements of a character's costume come to define the character and become a shorthand for them as individuals.

Through repetition of appearance, these costumes, and the characters they represent, become iconic and encoded with meaning that can be read when they appear in panels. The costumes become isotopies and formal elements that perform iconic and semantic correspondence throughout the narrative. With their costume, these characters can adopt new identities, different personalities, and new ways of acting. The costume is about creating a visual identity that is coded as more powerful, active, and desirable. The costume becomes a visible symbol for the power the character possesses. Once a character has received power, the next step they take on the journey to superhero or villain is becoming costumed. Because powers lead to a costume, the costume is constructed to reflect the powers that the individual and inscribing and highlighting physical, gendered, differences. The skin tight costumes associated with superhero comics not only transmit ideas about power, but also ideas about the gendered body. The

costume shapes and forms a new body that is gendered and formed to meet expectations of gender identity and gendered representation.

Costumes and Power

In many cases, it is impossible to separate the actual costume from the power that the character possesses. As Richard Reynolds points out in his book, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, "a costume can be 'read' to indicate an individual hero's character or powers."[315] The costume becomes visually synonymous with the powers of the character. When he puts his ring on and repeats his famous oath, "In brightest day, in blackest night…"[316] Whatever clothing Hal Jordan is wearing is replaced by his Green Lantern costume.

Green Lantern's name and identity reflect his costume and powers. His green and black uniform is emblazoned with a green lantern. This is the same symbol found on his green power ring, that he charges with a green lantern, so he can create green constructs from the green energy the ring produces. The importance of color and light is integral to Green Lantern's identity.(Fig. 38)[317] Color becomes part of the overarching narrative surrounding the character; from his onetime weakness to the color yellow, to the references of darkness and light in his oath, and his enemies wielding



Fig. 38 Green Lantern

[315] Richard Reynolds *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994) p. 26

[316] John Broome (w) and Gil Cane (a) "Secret of the Flaming Spear" *Showcase* Vol. 1 #22 (DC Comics October 1959) p. 3

[317] Geoff Johns (w) and Ethan Van Sciver (a) *Green Lantern: Rebirth* #1 (DC Comics: December 2004) Cover

sapphire, indigo, red, and orange rings. *Green Lantern* story lines reference a "War of Light"[318] and other light and dark based conflicts become major events in the *Green Lantern*.[319] Because the costume is meant to reflect the powers and modus operandi of the character wearing it, it becomes as important to understanding and defining the character as their powers do. The Golden Age heroes and villains were given costumes that would allow readers to immediately know what their powers were and which side of the law they were on.

The moment a villain like Captain Cold shows up to fight the Flash, his costume has already transmitted ideas about his powers and abilities to the reader.(Fig. 39)[320] If his name was not indication enough, his fur lined gloves, parka hood, and blue jumpsuit would inform the reader of his connection to ice or cold, long before he pulled out his ice gun and tried to encase the Scarlet Speedster in a block of ice. Not only does the costume function to mark the character as powered, but the designs and colors also communicate ideas of their allegiance and status as hero or villain.



Fig. 39 Captain Cold

---

[318] Geoff Johns, Dave Gibbons, andPeter J. Tomasi (w) and Ivan Reis, Patrick Glesson, and Ethan Van Sciver (a) *Green Lantern: The Sinestro Corps War* (New York: DC Comics, 2011) p. 330

[319] Geoff Johns (w) and Ivan Reis (a) *Blackest Night* (New York: DC Comics, 2011) and Geoff Johns and Peter J. Tomasi (w) and Ivan Reis, Patrick Gleason, Et al.(a) *Brightest Day Vol. 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2011)

[320] Geoff Johns (w) and Scott Kolins (a) *Final Crisis: Rogues' Revenge* #1 (DC Comics: December 2008) Cover

Captain America wore a costume that reflected his name and his allegiance to the side of freedom and liberty. The blue costume with its red and white stars and stripes communicated that this character was one of the good guys and fought for America. Created in the lead up to America's entry into World War II, Captain America's was meant to communicate patriotism. On the cover of his first issue, the Star Spangled Avenger in his bright red, white, and blue punches Hitler. His costume is contrasted against the brown of Hitler's uniform and the more drab greens and blues of the Nazi soldiers.(Fig. 40)[321] Captain America's archenemy, The Red Skull, also wears a costume that signals his allegiances. He is often drawn wearing the sleek blacks and silvers of Nazi SS uniforms. Like the white hats and black hats worn in western films, it was important for the reader to know immediately who was good and who was bad.



Fig. 40 Captain America takes on Hitler

When Wonder Woman wins the right to leave Paradise Island and fight against evil in "man's world"[322] the costume she is given is as Americentric as Captain America's. Her red bodice is emblazoned with the American eagle

[321] Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (w)(a) *Captain America Comics* #1 (Timely Comics March 1941) Cover

[322] William Moulton Marston (w) and Harry G. Peter (a) *The Wonder Woman Chronicles Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2010) pp. 11-12

and her blue skirt and shorts were star spangled. While the costume did not communicate as much about her powers as The Flash's yellow lightning bolts or Superman's strongman trunks, it did communicate that she was on the side of good. Soon she was right along side other patriotic heroes, doggedly smashing the axis.[323] To see Captain America, Mr. America, The Shield, Wonder Woman, and Uncle Sam[324] fight evil wearing the colors and symbols of America, imbued them with the powers of America and what it stood for. The costumes communicated a specific idea about power that was not easy for the artists to present in panel or with onomatopoeias and sound effects.

While Captain Cold, Green Lantern, Captain America, and Wonder Woman's costumes have seen changes and variations over the years, the way they are used to transmit ideas about powers, allegiances, and recognizability have maintained. These costumes become extensions of the character's identities and powers and are constant reminders of who the character is. As extensions of the individual character, they can also be the source of the characters powers. In some situations, it is the costume that literally makes the character powerful.

For billionaire Tony Stark, it is his Iron Man armour that gives him powerful weapons, protection, and flight. If Tony never built the armoured shell around himself, he would not have much in the way of exceptional powers. The Iron Man armour hides

---

[323] Madrid op cit p. 40

[324] Uncle Sam was, in his original incarnation, the spirit of a dead American Revolution patriot, and in another incarnation he is the literal spirit of America, formed by the American founding fathers during an occult ritual.

Stark's identity from the world[325] and is the direct source of Tony's superpowers. Instead of his powers defining his costume, Iron Man's costume defines his powers and he is able to expand the scope and types of powers he has access to by designing even more suits of armour to fit specific needs. Every new suit of armour - from Hulkbuster to Bleeding Edge - has the same iconic appearance and markers of Iron Man's powers. The red and gold color scheme and signature glowing circle in the armour's chest have been present in virtually all of the 50 plus armours that he has worn.

Much like Tony, Jaime Reyes is another character whose costume dictates his power. Normally, Jaime is just an average high schooler. He has no special training or athletic skills, and unlike Tony Stark, he is not super intelligent or super rich. After finding alien scarab, Jaime can be incased in a protective bio-mechanical suite. Encased in his armour and powered, Jaime's body and appearance is similar to that of a beetle or scarab, and so the name Blue Beetle seems appropriate.[326] Though he is not the first superhero with this name, his costume transmits ideas about his powers as well as connects him to the legacy of the previous Blue Beetles. Not only does the costume give Jamie powers, it molds his body from that of a scrawny teen, to the more muscled and idealized body of a superhero. Without their costumes, Tony and Jaime would be powerless and unable to gain entry into the superhero world.

---

[325] As per the tropes of superhero comics, Tony Stark originally had his identity as a billionaire and his identity as a superhero separate. This was achieved by an elaborate story that Iron Man was Tony Stark's personal body guard.

[326] Geoff Johns (w) and Phil Jimenez and George Perez (a) *Infinite Crisis* #3 (DC Comics: February 2006) p. 15

Even some of the already powered superheroes have costumes that enhance or expand the powers they have. Even though he has been able to survive with just his spider powers and the costume he made for himself, Spider-Man has had costumes that enhance or add to the powers that he has. In the 1984 cross over *Secret Wars,*[327] Spider-Man received a new black alien costume. This new costume was such a major change for the iconic character that it was the focus of the cover of the limited series' eighth issue. As all the other Marvel heroes and villains fight in the background, Spider-Man stands in his new black suit in the foreground. "Amid the chaos, there comes a costume..!"(Fig. 41)[328] the cover declares. The way this change in costume was presented made the most important aspect of the entire issue Spider-Man's new costume. This change and the attention it received does give an indication as to how important the costume is to both publishers and readers. The new costume not only gave Spider-Man a sleek new look, it also gave him new powers. He no longer had to create his own web fluid or use his mechanical web slingers, and the costume could change into whatever clothes Peter Parker wanted to wear. Peter eventually got rid of his alien



Fig. 41 Spider-Man in his new black and white Costume

[327] At the time of this writing, Marvel Comics is currently in the midst of another massive crossover titled *Secret Wars*. This one appears to be the impetus for a soft reboot of their line and continuity, and looks to introduce a number of new costumes for the Marvel characters.

[328] Jim Shooter (w) and Mike Zeck (a) *Secret Wars* (Marvel Comics: December 1984)

costume and went back to his tried and true design.[329] Though that would not be the last time Spider-Man adopted a new costume with new powers.[330]

Whether their costume is directly the source of their power or an indication of power, the costume marks a character as powered and helps to define who they are. Part of this definition comes in placing the powered and costumed character in opposition to their identity out of costume. Dr. Pamela Isley and Dr. Harley Quenzel may seem like respectable and trustworthy individuals, but once they put on their costumes, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn become criminals and villains, causing chaos on the streets of Gotham.

Unlike Tony Stark, Peter Parker and Clark Kent still have impressive super powers when they take their costumes off, but must act in accordance with their appearance. With his blue tights and big red S, Superman can punch planets and save the day. In a suit and tie, Clark needs to be week and awkward.[331] This visual transition between unpowered and without a costume to powered and wearing a costume is an expected trope of the superhero comic.

Putting on a costume forms a new identity, persona, and way of being seen. The costume goes beyond marking the body as a powered, it also works to shape the character's body. In their costumes they become spectacles of humanity amplified. For gender and gendered representations, this amplification fits with the expected gender roles and performances of the discrete genders. The body that is constructed by the

---

[329] The suit is still around. After being rejected by its host, it found a human that hated Spider-Man as much as it did and bonded with Eddie Brock to create the spider powered villain, Venom.

[330] Famously, in the 2006 event Civil War, Spider-Man is given an Iron Spider suit invented and designed by Tony Stark. This gave Peter added powers and an appearance that mirrored Iron Man. See: J. Michael Straczynski (w) Ron Garney (a) *The Amazing Spider-Man* #529 (Marvel Comics: April 2006) pp. 3,7

[331] Grant Morrison (w) and Frank Quietly (a) *All-Star Superman* (New York: DC Comics, 2011) p. 19

costume is heavily influenced by perceptions and expectations of gender. The costume works to form and reinforce discreet genders and meet bodily expectations.

Costumes and the Body

In the pilot episode of *The Flash*, a 2014 television adaptation of the comic, Barry Allen has been struck by a bolt of lightning that places him in a coma and imbues him with super speed. Waking up from his 9 month coma, he is informed of the lightning strike and sees his shirtless body on a nearby tv monitor. "Lightning gave me abs?"[332] he asks, seeing his new powered body for the first time. While his TV persona currently eschews the skin tight, muscled, version of his costume that is present in the comics, the concept of powers shaping the body is still present in the TV narrative.

We see a similar moment in the 2002 *Spider-Man* film. After being bitten by the radioactive spider that gives him his power, Toby Maguire as Peter Parker examines his newly toned and powered body in the mirror. His Aunt May asks, worried about his health, "Feeling better this morning? Any change?" Peter flexes and replies, "Change? Yep. BIG change."[333] For the heroes and villains of superhero comics, being imbued with power starts the process of altering and shaping the body. Captain America, like The Flash or Spider-Man becomes more muscular and powerful when he is injected with the Super Soldier Syrum. In later representations, Poison Ivy's powers make her skin green, and in current reboots, Harley Quinn's process of receiving power bleaches her skin.

---

[332] Greg Berlanti "Pilot" *The Flash* (CW: 7 October, 2014)

[333] *Spider-Man*, DVD, directed by Sam Raimi (2002; Burbank, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment)

All of these examples present a common theme in the superhero narrative: with powers, comes a bodily change. The powered body is different from a powerless body. In some cases, this change takes on a grotesque transformation. For mutants in the Marvel Universe, their powers can severely alter their body into grotesque and bizarre forms. The same way that the iconic nature of the costume makes a character automatically recognizable in the panel, the costumed and powered body's gender also needs to be automatically recognizable from the moment they appear.

Knowing the gender of the body visually dictates how the body should perform. As Judith Butler says, "The more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence."[334] Similarly, Michel Foucault says that one way that bodies are disciplined is through "the uninterrupted play of calculated gazes."[335] The body in comics transmits specific ideas about gender through physical markers that are easily seen and identified by the dominant position. The gender inscribed body is not only easier to identify, but also easier to understand and in turn control. A female gendered body is not only expected to appear a certain way, but to also perform a type of femaleness according to an expected set of rules.

Even when Tony Stark puts on his armoured exterior, that armour is meant to reflect expectations of the male body. Armoured and armed, the Iron Man costume is not expected to be as form fitting as Spider-Man or Batman's, but the muscled and masculine

---

[334] Butler *Theater Journal* op cit p. 524

[335] Michel Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Trans Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979) p. 177

body still translates through. The armour covering Tony's stomach is often shaped to resemble abs and muscle definition. His muscled arms and legs appear to be wrapped in gold fabric or spandex instead of metal. All of this helps to mark the body as male and to transmit perceptions of the masculine body. Like the male body, the female body must be marked as female and easily definable. If long hair or feminine facial features are not enough or possible, the superhero narrative uses primal indicators of sex and gender to mark the female body. Breasts in particular have become a staple of superhero comics.(Fig. 42)[336]



Fig. 42 Tony Stark and Pepper Potts in their gendered armours and bodies

When Pepper Potts, Tony's sometimes girlfriend and secretary, is given her own armour, she is given power with it. While Iron Man-like in appearance, the costume is constructed to make sure the reader knows that the wearer is female. The Rescue Armour - as it is called because it has no offensive capabilities - does what costumes are supposed to do.[337] It indicates that Pepper is now powered, placing the iconic blue power battery centered between her breasts. This indicates that she has power

---

[336] Matt Fraction (w) and Salvador Larroca (a) *Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 1 #527 (Marvel Comics: December 2012), Kelly Sue DeConnick (w) and Andrea Mutti (a) *Rescue* #1 (Marvel Comics: July 2010)

[337] Matt Fraction (w) and Salvador Larroca (a) *Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 2 #11 (Marvel Comics: May 2009) pp. 1-2

and references back to the true nature of that power which is Tony.[338] Along with those iconic symbols of power, the armour is designed so that her breasts are accentuated. When she is fully armoured, there is no way that the reader can mistake her for the male Iron Man. The armoured abs and muscles are replaced by breasts and curves as become part of how the female armour appears.

Being powered and then being costumed accentuates the individual. In costume, they become more noticeably marked as gendered and forced into the expectations of those gender performances. In the form fitting costumes of superhero comics, male characters and their bodies become more muscular and toned, transmitting ideas of strength and invulnerability. Batman's body becomes armoured, invulnerable, and an ideal form of masculinity to strive for. Female characters, however, become stripped and uncovered. Even when covered, their costumes fit to accentuate markers of sex and gender. They become more buxom, curvy, and in many cases more revealed. When Black Widow puts on her costume and reveals her powered self, she is presented unzipped or within the panel to show off the curve of her breasts and butt. This way of presenting the costumed female body is how the logonomic system transmits ideas of feminine, or the expected performance and presentation of the female body. The female body should be passive and seen, while the male body becomes more active and powerful.

Looking again at the costumed and costumeless Superman and Clark Kent: putting on his costume makes him more muscular and masculine and he loses the

---

[338] When Spider-man gets his costume and armour from Tony, there is not the need for a power battery in his chest to reference the iconic nature of Iron Man's power, but for Pepper, the reader needs to be reminded that her power is dependent on already existing male power.

eyeglasses. His hair becomes more daring and the messy, unkempt mop on top of Clark's head becomes the iconic Superman spit curl. Once in his costume, he becomes elevated, sometimes literally, above everyone else. He is now iconic, more active, and more desirable. In becoming more masculine, the transition from Clark to Superman not only presents a more masculine body, but also a more masculine sexuality. The same way that receiving powers means becoming more sexual, putting on a costume makes a hero more sexually desirable. For the majority of Superman's 75 years of publication, Clark Kent tried and failed multiple times to impress or woo Lois Lane. This is partially because she was interested in figuring out how to trick Superman into marrying her. The costume and its big red S endows Superman with a super level of sexual attractiveness.

In *All-Star Superman*, the villain, Lex Luther, points out Clark Kent's lack of sexual appeal and potential in vying for Lois Lane's affection and attention. "without Superman to distract her…perhaps cool, cruel Lois Lane might actually have noticed good old Clark…but next to him, she sees an oaf, a dullard, a cripple!"[339] With the lack of costume making him less masculine, Clark Kent has no chance of getting Lois. Clark Kent is sexually unappealing in comparison to Superman and his costume. Even Lois is quick to point out she has no interest in Clark Kent. When Clark bumps into a man on the street, the man tells Lois, "Your boyfriend's an idiot!" Her response is quick, "he's not my idiot!"[340] She has no intention of being seen as a potential mate for Clark Kent, but is willing to concede that he is an idiot. When it comes to her relationship with Superman,

---

[339] Morrison (w) and Quietly (a) op cit p. 111

[340] ibid p. 21

she is also quick to label herself as "Superman's girlfriend."[341] With his lack of a costume and a perceived lack of power, Clark Kent is a sexually unappealing partner. He is effeminate and weak in comparison to the powerful and masculine Superman. The costume not only gives him access to his power, but also to women.

For Superman, with powers eventually comes a costume, and with those costumes comes the chance to perform a particular type of masculinity. The masculinity that is performed through these costumes, and the sexuality that is attached to it, is about being sexually dominant and active. The expected masculine body is active, powerful, and something that the reader should want to become or emulate. While the reader may not want a mutated or exact copy of the male body that is presented in comics, they do want to have and emulate the ideal of perfection and strength that the images of those bodies represent.[342]

At the same time that the male body is constructed and presented to be emulated and active, the female body is presented and constructed to be seen and objectified. Because of the expectations of female gender performance, when female characters obtain powers and costumes, the sexuality and appearance that is associated with them is presented as passive. The costumes of female characters display the physical indicators of female sexuality and gender identification. Expectations of the female body - breasts, butt, curves, etc. - are displayed and highlighted by their costumes and the way the

---

[341] A regular series titled, *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane* was regularly published from March 1958 until October 1974, producing 137 issues and 2 annuals.

[342] Wolk op cit p. 65

female body is placed and manipulated in panels. In the discourse of superhero comics, gender is inseparably intwined with biological indicators of sex.

A Brief History of Female Comic Bodies

The way female bodies are constructed, clothed, and represented in comics tend to correlate with perceptions of the female body and clothing in the time periods that the characters show up in. Much of the early aesthetics and ideas about how female characters would look and dress in early comics reflected popular entertainment during and before World War II. During this time, "Good Girl Art" started to become popular and reached its peak during the war as it became popular among troops fighting in the European and Pacific theaters.[343] Good Girl Art is what some would call today, cheesecake art. Women pose - or are posed - to accentuate legs, cleavage, or other biological markers of gender. The women tended to be half-dressed and affected the popular pinup look of the time. The popularity of this type of photography and art quickly translated into the way women were drawn and placed in panels of comics. The popular, Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, was one character that was constructed to meet the desire for more cheesecake.

Sheena wore a nondescript, short, red dress throughout her early adventures in the jungle with her sidekick Bob. Bob performed and looked the adventuring type. He was muscular and wore the boots and pants one would expect of a white traveler in the exotic Africa of 1930s and 40s film and TV.[344] Sheena though, looked less like a queen of the

---

[343] Madrid op cit p. 44

[344] W. Morgan Thomas "Sheena Queen of the Jungle" *Jumbo Comics* #1 (Fiction House: October 1939) p. 1

jungle, and more a New York socialite. In *Jumbo Comics* #10 though, her outfit changed to reflect a more *Tarzan of the Apes*-jungle-cheesecake motif. Visiting a village, Sheena and Bob learn that the natives are being terrorized by a lion. Stepping up, Sheena vows to stop the lion and eventually succeeds by killing it with her bare hands. Sheena comes out of the fight with her red dress ripped and barely hanging on.[345] Finding a replacement in what the jungle offered her, Sheena fashions a new dress from the skin of a leopard.[346] The new outfit looked more Queen of the Jungle, and it's design went much farther in revealing as much of Sheena as it could get away with. "There! How do you like my new dress, Bob?"(Fig. 43)[347] Sheena is shown posing in her best Betty Page stance. Her outfit was more a skimpy swimsuit with a navel plunging neckline than a dress. From then on, Sheena's costume was meant to show as much leg and cleavage as the artists could get away with.



Fig. 43 Sheena and her new dress

Sheena was not the only cheesecake being sold on the news stands by her publisher, Fiction House. Fiction House specialized in cheesecake and the occasional bit of kink. Their primary goal was to sell comics to men.[348] The way their characters were

---

[345] ibid pp. 3-7

[346] ibid p. 8

[347] ibid p. 8

[348] Madrid op cit p. 44

drawn and posed was all about titillation. Sheena was drawn showing off her breasts in always carefully placed and concealing leopard skin. By making the leggy, buxom, female body forefront in their publications, Fiction House and a number of other publishers were able to give their target audience exactly what it wanted and expected.[349] However, this was not the only way comics, or superheroes, were being sold at the time. A number of superheroes, Wonder Woman in particular, were being drawn and presented in much more athletic and less pinup styles. Wonder Woman was rarely drawn busty. Her skirt and shorts tended towards a conservative length. Her appearance tended more towards a 1920s flapper than to a Vargas Girl pinup.[350] Audience had a lot to do with this. Marston and his artist, Harry G. Peter, imagined an audience of young girls they could empower and boys that were ready to learn about Marston's feminist ideas of matriarchal power.[351] Sheena's artists wanted to give soldiers something to ogle and maybe hang on a barracks wall.[352] Soon both types of costumes and the way their bodies were rendered changed after Dr. Wertham and the adoption of the Comics Code Authority.

Besides his strong criticism of the violence he saw in comics, Wertham also targeted the sexualized imagery he saw in some of the more popular titles being sold. Because of Wetham's criticism and media attention on comics, Shenna's publisher Fiction House attempted to rework old stories by softening the violence and covering up some of the skin. These attempts never proved popular or worth the publisher's efforts.

---

[349] ibid p. 44

[350] ibid p. 45

[351] ibid p. 45

[352] ibid p. 44

Fiction House quite publishing comics in 1954 along with a number of other companies that could not or would not make their titles work with the new regulations that were being imposed on comics and comic publishers.[353] With the introduction and adoption of the Comics Code, the female body and costumes received special attention and instruction.

The Comics Code, along with its restrictions on how civil servants should be portrayed, the type of gore allowed, the words that could be used in titles, and the type of monsters that were prohibited, was quite specific on how the female body should be presented: "Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities."[354] Large breasts, extra-long legs, and large back sides now had the potential of causing a comic to be rejected and sent back for rewrites and redrawing. Many female heroes and adventurers had to be changed to even get published. Along with the body, many of the costumes would need to be changed. "Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure."[355] On both of these grounds, it became obvious why some female characters like Sheena disappeared completely. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Comics Code, more than an actual ratings or review board like the MPAA in Hollywood, worked to enforce specific ideas of cultural norms and morals. A term as vague as "undue exposure" could mean just about anything and could be applied more loosely or strictly depending on who was doing the reviewing. These requirements on publishers and creators caused some like Fiction House to simply give up and close down their

---

[353] ibid p. 50

[354] Haidu op cit p. 375

[355] ibid p. 376

publishing efforts. Others simply stopped publishing comics with girls and women in them.

In a post-Code comics publishing world, the female costume became more about how publishers saw potential female readers. At DC and Marvel, the few female superheroes being published became less focused on actually fighting crime and villains and more on fashion and having trendy costumes. For almost 40 years, Janet Van Dyne was one of the few female characters that appeared regularly in Marvel titles. As a fashion designer in her non-costumed and non-powered identity, she was constantly designing new costumes for herself. As the Wasp, and a member of the Avengers, Janet has had literally hundreds of different costumes. Issue to issue, and sometimes multiple times in the same issue, Janet became known for all of her costumes. A new costume was so integral to who Janet was that when evil threatens the United Nations, Janet's first concern was not how to save people, but that she had nothing new to wear into battle.[356]

Janet's concern about clothing has permeated most of her publication history. In *Avengers* Issue #222, Janet takes team member She-Hulk out shopping for some new clothes. Their day is interrupted by an attack from the Masters of Evil. Before She-Hulk can enter the fray, however, Janet warns her that, "That outfit is an original. If you tear it, I'll never speak to you again!"[357] As a compromise, She-Hulk strips out of her cloths and gets back to the fight wearing only her lacy bra and panties. This prompts one of the

---

[356] Roy Thomas (w) and Sal Buscema (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #68 (Marvel Comics: September 1969) p. 9

[357] Jim Shooter and Steven Grant (w) and Greg LaRocque (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #222 (Marvel Comics: August 1982) p. 19

villains to ask, “Who in? Some chick from Frederick's of Hollywood?”[358] The expectation of female characters was that their relationship with their costumes was less about power and and more about looking good as they went into battle. Though Janet has become better at being a superhero over the last 50 or so years, fashion and trendy new costumes are woven through the canonical fabric of her existence. In 2014, Wolverine still calls her,“Fashion Fly”[359] and she is responsible for a line of clothes that she hopes will inspire kids to like mutants more.[360]

Jean Grey as Marvel Girl was also presented as a fashion conscious character. Putting on her X-Men costume to head out on her first team adventure, she looks at her reflection in the mirror and marvels, “whoever designed this costume could give Christian Dior a run for his money.”[361] She was good to go out and fight crime, just so long as she looked good doing it. This particular panel also highlights the real purpose of having their female characters wearing trendy and fashionable costumes, and that was to be more appealing to their male teammates. As Jean surveys her own figure in the mirror, the four male members of the X-Men peak around the corner at her, “Wowee! Looks like she was poured into that uniform.”[362] Even with restrictions on physical proportions and exposure, the new fashion savvy female characters performed to their gendered expectations by being seen, and inviting the gaze and attention of the men around them.

---

[358] ibid p. 21

[359] Rick Remender (w) and Daniel Acuna (a) *Uncanny Avengers* Vol. 1 #7 (Marvel Comics: June 2013) p. 10

[360] ibid p. 13

[361] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a) *X-Men* Vol. 1 #1 (Marvel Comics: September 1963) p. 16

[362] ibid p. 16

During this same time period, DC Comics was also pushing the idea of fashion conscious female characters in their own books. Unlike Marvel, a number of DC's female characters either survived the comics code or were new female versions of their already existing male characters. Like Batgirl, Supergirl was basically a female version of the already existing Superman. She is a survivor of Krypton and possesses the same powers and weaknesses as her male counterpart; the main differences between the two characters were gendered differences. Where Superman was muscled and dressed in his traditional costume, Supergirl was thinner, had long blond hair, and wore a skirt. Supergirl was also more concerned with dating and clothes than actually performing heroics. Supergirl's obsession with fashion and a new costume led to DC trying to get readers involved. In 1970, DC Comics decided to run a design contest in *Adventure Comics*, the main title starring Supergirl. Readers were asked to design and submit a new costume for the Girl of Steel and the winner's design would be incorporated into the story as Supergirl's new costume.

The cover of *Adventure Comics* #397 shows Supergirl, surrounded by a number of the submitted costume designs. The designs ranged from power suits to bathing suits and others with short skirts and thigh high boots. Supergirl even notes on the cover, "The readers have sent in so many great ideas for a new costume that I just don't know which one to pick." Below her the editorial voice asks the reader,



Fig. 44 Reader designs for Supergirl's new costume

"Can you guess which new costume Supergirl will choose?"(Fig. 44)[363] Like with the Spider-Man's *Secret Wars* cover, the contest and it's culmination on the cover of *Adventure Comics* highlights just how integral the costume was to defining a character.

Supergirl's new costume was worked into the narrative of the story and allowed another one of DC's major female characters to highlight her new fashion friendly attitude. Investigating a coven of witches on her college campus, Supergirl winds up in a fight that shreds her costume. Like Shenna, Harley Quinn, and a number of other female character Supergirl has her old costume shredded and ripped to initiate the introduction of a new costume. To get her new costume, Supergirl heads to the one place that a female superhero in the DC Universe can go, Wonder Woman's boutique. Depowered and running her own shop, Wonder Woman comes to Supergirl's aid and the reader designed costume makes its appearance. Not only do Supergirl and Wonder Woman approve of the new costume, but the comic promises to show off more designs in the next issue.(Fig. 45)[364] With her new costume on, Supergirl saves the day and is looking more trendy for it. Supergirl, much like Wasp, went through a number of different costumes beyond just the contest winning one.



Fig. 45 Getting a new costume and Wonder Woman's boutique

For the women at Marvel and DC, their clothes and costumes were becoming less and

---

[363] Mike Sekowsky (w)(a) *Adventure Comics* #397 (DC Comics: September 1970)

[364] ibid p. 11

less about their powers or marking them as powered, and more a reflection of gendered expectations and performance. The fashion obsessed characters were simply reflecting a cultural assumption that women were only really concerned with clothes and shoes. Where young boys in the 60s and 70s were getting G.I. Joe action figures and their expanding line of military and fighting gear, girls were buying up Barbie and her line of new outfits and clothing accessories. With a revamp of the Comics Code in 1971, the female body and their costumes started to change to match new ideas and expectations of the female body.

The revised code still required women to be drawn realistically, but instead of limiting "exaggeration" of female body parts, the new guidelines for the female body said they should be drawn "Without any undue emphasis on any physical quality."[365] Along with this change, the limit on indecent or undue exposure was removed in favor of making "Suggestive and salacious illustration"[366] unacceptable. With just a few small changes, representation of the female body and their costumes started to shift and reflect the hyper sexualized bodies that had started to appear on TV and magazine covers.

In 1989, the Comics Code was redrafted once again. Bullet lists of specific rules were replaced with editorial suggestions. In the section titled "Sexuality and Attire" creators and editors were told, "Costumes in a comic books will be considered to be acceptable if they fall within the scope of contemporary styles and fashions."[367]

---

[365] "Comics Code Revision of 1971" *Comic Book League Defense Fund* <http://cbldf.org/comics-code-revision-of-1971/>

[366] ibid

[367] "Comics Code Revision of 1989" *Comic Book League Defense Fund* <http://cbldf.org/comics-code-revision-of-1989/>

Language, substance abuse, and violence all received multiple paragraphs and sentences on how the topics should be addressed, but sexuality and attire received only the one vague sentence. As the Comics Code was becoming more and more impotent and outdated, the ’89 revisions meant that female characters could look and dress like the supermodels and actresses in popular media. Soon female superheroes looked like they had stepped out of films like *Showgirls*, *Pretty Woman*, and *Striptease,* or books and magazines like *Vanity Fair, Playboy,* or Madonna’s infamous, *Sex*.[368]

Good Girls vs. Bad Girls

Where the comics of the 1940s and 50s had Good Girl Art, the 80s and 90s developed Bad Girl Art. Where Good Girl Art was about titillation, Bad Girl Art was all about sexualization. The costumes worn by female characters were no longer about fashion but about shaping and revealing the female body. While having She-Hulk battle it out with the Masters of Evil in just her underwear would have been unheard of before the comic code changes made in 71, by the time the 80s had rolled around, some of the costumes worn by female characters seemed more like underwear than anything else. With Bad Girl Art and changing expectations of the female body, female characters needed to be marked as female characters more than just by being interested in female things like fashion. Female characters needed to appear unmistakably female. The more extreme examples of this came in the form of characters outside of mainstream publishing.

---

[368] Madrid op cit pp. 278-279

Indy publishers like Chaos Comics and Image Comics did not bother submitting their comics to the Comic Code Authority. Since most comics by the 90s were being sold through comic shops, and those shops did not care about code approval to carry a book, companies like Image seemed to take particular joy in ramping up the sex and violence as far as they could. Characters like Lady Death and Witchblade(Fig. 46)[369] became massively popular examples of Bad Girl Art.[370] Lady Death, published by Chaos Comics, was once a normal girl who made a deal with a demon and became the pale-skinned, enormous-breasted, black-bikini-wearing denizen of hell.[371] Her origin and transformation fits with the superhero stereotypes and expectations of female characters. She receives power and then a new costume. In Lady Death's case, her costume and power are about accentuating and presenting her body and very little to do with the actual powers she possesses. Witchblade fits more into the Tony



Fig. 46 Lady Death and Witchblade, queens of the Bad Girls

[369] These two were so popular, they even appeared in two cross over events, *Lady Death & Witchblade* and *Lady Death &Medieval Witchblade.*

[370] Madrid op cit p. 281

[371] Brian Pulido (w) and Steven Hughes (a) *Lady Death* #0 (Chaos Comics: November 1997) Cover

Stark, Jaime Reyes type of superheroes, but in Sara Pezzini's case, the armour and costume she has literally shapes and strips her body.[372]

As a New York City homicide detective, Sara Pezzini comes into possession of an ancient artifact known as the Witchblade.[373] It is a mystical item that has only bonded with women throughout history. When dormant, the artifact looks like an innocuous bracelet or watch. However, when danger presents itself, the Witchblade activates and turns into a gauntlet and armour.[374] The term armour here is misleading. What actually happens is that bony, organic looking material snakes out from the gauntlet, shredding virtually all of Sara's clothes. When costumed and powered, Sara is left mostly naked except for where the Witchblade has conveniently covered her pubic area and nipples. The design of the barely there costume did mark the difference between un-powered Sara and powered Sara, but it also worked to shape and construct a specific image of her body. If the reader was not aware that Sara was female before, powered and in battle, there was no mistaking it now.

Since *Lady Death* and *Witchblade* comics were published by indy publishers without Comics Code approval they could be seen as exceptions and outliers. However, because of the success of these and other titles, - Chaos comics reported selling almost a million dollars of Lady Death comics and merchandise in just August of 1995[375] - Marvel

---

[372] Pulido (w) and Hughes (a) op cit, Christina Z (w) and Michael Turner (a) *Witchblade* #8 (Image Comics: August 1996) Cover

[373] David Wohl (w) and Michael Turner (a) *Witchblade* #1 (Image Comics: November 1995) p.20

[374] David Wohl (w) and Michael Turner (a) *Witchblade* #3 (Image Comics: March 1996) p. 14

[375] Buddy Scalera "The Last Days of CHAOS! An Interview with Brian Pulido" *Comics Bulletin* <http://comicsbulletin.com/buddy/104305863170834.htm>

and DC's female characters and their costumes followed similar trends. The new expectations of female bodies were more sexual and revealing, and their bodies and costumes needed to reflect that. Over at Marvel, the first family of comics, the Fantastic Four, was not immune from the influence of Bad Girl Art. Sue Storm, the Invisible Woman and mother of two, decided that, "I was starting to feel like an old frump in that tedious, outdated jumpsuit."(Fig. 47)[376] Sue's alternative was a new navel, leg, and cleavage revealing costume. The iconic number 4 that emblazoned all of the Fantastic Four's costumes was still there, but in this new costume it served as a Power Girl-esq boob window. The stomach was also opened in the Huntress style to show off her stomach. Instead of the jumpsuit pants everyone else on the team wore, Sue's new costume had a swimsuit bottom and thigh high boots. Sue also wore a single blue band of fabric around each thigh, but it was never really clear why.


Fig. 47 A more sexualized Sue Storm

Like Wonder Woman's 90s Bad Girl costume, Sue's new design did not last for long. Wonder Woman changed back to her status quo as she tends to do. For Sue, it may have been readers did not want to see the motherly Invisible Woman that blatantly sexualized. The costumes still work as reminders of the time period's obsession with skimpier costumes and hyper feminine bodies. Baywatch had become the most popular

[376] Tom DeFalco (w) and Paul Ryan (a) *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1 #371 (Marvel Comics: December 1992) p. 10

TV show on American television and soon the female characters in superhero comics reflected the bodies and costumes of Pamela Anderson and her buxom fellow lifeguards.[377] As more cleavage and more skin was expected by the dominant position, the discourse surrounding comics started to reflect those expectations.

Wizard, a magazine specifically marketed to comic shops and comic fans, became the comic version of a men's magazine or lad mag, but with Catwoman, Jean Grey, and other female comic characters seductively posed on the cover. Inside were regular lists of the sexiest superheroes, reviews of X-Men and DC Comics swimsuit specials, and pull out posters of the Bad Girls in their new costumes.[378] While most modern superhero comics do not reach the size and scope of blatant sexualization and bodily proportions of the Bad Girl comics in the 90s, the sexualized bodies and revealing costumes of female characters has become the perception and expectation of modern superhero comics. The evolution to this status quo can be seen in the way the body and costumes of iconic female characters have evolved.

Putting Psylocke Back Together Again

During the 80s, many of the female X-men characters had started to look a bit more punk and androgynous. Storm had traded in her tiara, long white hair, and cleavage revealing costume for a short mohawk, leather jacket, and tank top. She looked more like the opener for Debby Harry than a New York fashionista or Victoria's Secret model.(Fig.

---

[377] Madrid op cit p. 278

[378] ibid p. 280

48)[379] Storm and the other X-Women were obviously still female, but they did not always fit into the visually sexualized or revealed forms that were becoming more prevalent and expected. Storm was still a female character, but her costume did not allow for her body to be an easily identifiable and sexualized female form. Her figure was not overtly busty and her legs and midriff were not constantly exposed. Unlike many of the other female characters appearing in other titles at the time, she went away from the stereotypical bathing suit costume into something more in line with 80s underground fashion. Storm had a distinct style and looked ready for a night out in a New York punk club. She wore pants instead of leggings and layers instead of curve-clinging spandex. She was not the only X-Woman to appear with a more practical and believable costume.



Fig. 48 Punk Rock Storm

In the late 70s, comic readers in the UK and the US were introduced to Elizabeth "Betsy" Braddock. Betsy was part of an aristocratic British family. Her brother, Brian, was the hero Captain Britain and she served as a telepathic support character in the Marvel UK, *Captain Britain*, title.[380] It was soon revealed that her powers were mutant in origin and she joined the X-Men family. As part of the mutant super team, Betsy took on

---

[379] Chris Claremont (w) and Paul Smith (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #173 (Marvel Comics: September 1973) p.19

[380] Chris Claremont (w) and Herb Trimpe (a) *Captain Britain* Vol. 1 #8 (Marvel UK: December 1976)

the code name Psylocke. Her costume throughout the 80s still signaled to the reader she was female, but was covering and androgynous in comparison to other female characters. As a Brit, her costume reflected American ideas of classical and mythological Britain. Betsy was covered in armour and her appearance had a futuristic, Knights of the Round Table look with a cloak and hood. The armour was still form fitting and it was obvious that she had the bodily markers of femaleness. Like Pepper Pot's Rescue armour, Betsy's armour was crafted with breasts and their prominence in mind.(Fig. 49)[381] But even with her form fitting armour, Psylocke's body was not the primary focus of the character.


Fig. 49 Armoured Betsy Braddock

With a relaunch and revitalizing of the X-Men line of books underway, the logonomic system was able to rework and reactivate expectations within the titles. Both Storm and Psylocke saw major and minor costume changes. Storm grew her hair out and went to a more form fitting costume. Psylocke, however, underwent a major bodily change. Not only did she receive a more revealing costume, but her body was literally altered to conform to a more sexualized and fetishized body. In 1989, Psylocke's narrative arc takes her to Hong Kong. With her memory erased she is found by an ancient band of ninja assassins.[382] Over the course of *Uncanny X-Men* #256, Psylocke's body is transformed from the body of a white European woman, armoured and covered, into the stripped and revealed body of an Asian

---

[381] Chris Claremont (w) and Jim Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #248 (Marvel Comics: September 1989) p. 9

[382] Chris Claremont (w) and Marc Silvestri (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #255 (Marvel Comics: December 1989) p. 10

woman. As Betsy notes later, "My body is Asian, but my mind remains European."[383] Betsy gain new powers and new abilities from the Hand Assassins as well as a new costume that accentuates her new Asian body.

Though the specifics of how a white European body is transformed into an Asian body is not explained in the issue, her transformation is accompanied by images of Betsy's old appearance and body being shredded and ripped apart.[384] Betsy is ripped and shredded to reveal a perkier, more feminine, Asian body just under her old body. Even as her skin and body are ripped away to reveal the new Betsy, she is shown pulling away her old clothing and uniform to present a more revealing swimsuit outfit that accentuates and reveals curves.[385] Her first appearance in the new costume highlights how much of her new body it reveals. Placed in the foreground of the panel, Betsy hunches down and faces away from the reader. Her costume is only a small triangle of fabric that barely covers her rear. All of the old androgyny, covering, and her European body has been stripped away. Betsy notes that "all the old…ripped away as easily as was my skin"[386] once she is fully transformed.

For Betsy, this change is about reshaping her body and encoding it with new meaning. The narrative arc starts to focused on bodily transformation and makes her more of a sexual being. She and the reader are told at the beginning of the issue,

---

[383] Fabian Nicieza (w) and Andy Kubert (a) *X-men* Vol. 2 #22 (Marvel Comics: July 1993) p.17

[384] Chris Claremont (w) and Jim Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #256 (Marvel Comics: December 1989) p. 15

[385] Claremont (w) and Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* #256 op cit p. 19

[386] ibid p. 19

"Welcome back to the body shoppe Miss Betsy."[387] Betsy's transformation is first and foremost a bodily transformation. Betsy's body becomes something that the narrative, "will shape and mold, into the image of the Hand."[388] Narratively, it would be assumed that after her transformation she would look more like the rest of the Hand Ninjas, but they are all male, covered head to toe. Betsy is molded into an assassin who is half-naked and fully exposed. Her body has been shaped into a more objectifiable, feminine, and sexualized body.

The transformation from European to Asian can be seen as a Western and colonial way of making her more feminine and sexually exotic. As Peter Lehman says, "Asian body parts are hyperbolically feminized that rely upon Oriental myths and stereotypes to affect pleasure."[389] Throughout the narrative of her transformation, Betsy is surrounded by and reflects Western myths of the East. Her eyes and nose are smaller and more petite. At one point, she sits cross legged in a yoga like pose in her revealing new costume.[390] With her new body, she adopts codes and affectations of Western perceptions of Eastern cultures. Betsy has become coded and altered to be an "exotic…pleasure source for an insatiable and perverse colonial appetite."[391] From the moment of her bodily transformation she becomes more sexualized and more objectified as a character. Transformed from European to Asian she becomes more exotic and, as Lehman points

---

[387] ibid p. 14 The again in this quote is a reference to the fact that in her earliest appearances in an X-Men book, she has her eyes replaced with bionic ones by an inter-dimensional dictator and TV mogul.

[388] Chris Claremont (w) and Jim Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #258 (Marvel Comics: February 1990) p. 6

[389] Peter Lehman *Pornography: Film and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2006) p. 236

[390] Claremont (w) and Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* #258 op cit p. 6

[391] Lehman op cit p. 237

out, more consumable and objectified. Within an Asian body, the expectation is that Psylocke has been built and constructed to be consumed by colonial forces of the West. The expectation and perception is that this body is uniquely made for sex.

Once a second or third string character in the X-Men rosters, the transformed Psylocke became more popular within the discourses of the comics field, "Basically, Marvel gave a third-rate character a makeover, hence, creating one of the most popular female mutants in X-Men History."[392] Now Psylocke was "eye candy that's less lollipop and more atomic warhead."[393] By becoming more sexualized, by having a more revealed and sexed body, Psylocke became more narratively visible, and more popular with the dominant position. As the character is told, the "Body shoppe helped you become something you never were in your former body."[394] With a body that was more visible and a costume that was more revealing, Psylocke was presented to highlight these new bodily aspects and became a more sexually prominent, or to the popular discourse, a better character.

Beyond just her costume, almost anything Psylocke wore had a sexual component. Her sexualized body became a focal point of who she was. During an attack on her fellow X-Men and the mansion that served as their training school, Psylocke is taking a swim while the male characters train and work. She arrives, more irritated than anything, to respond to the alarms; still wet and still in her bikini. In a panel that is about

---

[392] Kyle Braun "UGO's Guid to Ninjas" *UGO* (16 May 2008) <http://www.ugo.com/channels/filmTv/features/ninjaguide/?cur=psylocke>

[393] ibid

[394] Fabian Nicieza (w) and Andy Kubert (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #32 (Marvel Comics: May 1994) p. 4

action and danger, Psylocke is placed as the only one of three characters that has their entire body shown.(Fig. 50)[395] Cyclops' head is at the forefront while Colossus is shown running towards the reader in his costumed and ready for battle. Psylocke is given prominence and focus in the panel. Her bathing suit is revealing more of her body than her costume has before. While the narrative focus of the panel may be for Cyclops to inform the reader and the other characters of an intruder, the visual purpose of the panel is to show Psylocke's body.



Fig. 50 Asian Psylocke

Even other characters note that Psylocke is a more sexual character and that her body represents a more sexually available female. As Fellow X-Man Jubilee points out when Psylocke walks out of the mansion "in the 'I-want-sex' outfit she was wearin'?"[396] Psylocke is first and foremost her body and her ability to appear appealing, tantalizing, exotic, and sexually available. "Psylocke is a thing of beauty"[397] the reader is told. The narrative lets the reader know that Psylocke and her body exist to be seen, observed, and objectified. In her European body and old costume, Psylocke was marked as locked away. She was less feminine, less compliant, and less sexually available. As Asian and uncovered in her new costume, Psylocke transmits ideas and meaning of myths of the submissive women of Asia and Japan. Her new body

---

[395] John Byrne and Jim Lee (w) and Jim Lee (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #5 (Marvel Comics: February 1992) p. 3

[396] Fabian Nicieze (w) and Andy Kubert (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #20 (Marvel Comics: May 1993) p. 14

[397] Fabian Nicieza (w) and Brandon Peterson (a) *X-Men* Vol. 2 #21 (Marvel Comics: June 1993) p. 27

communicates ideas of the "pan-pan" or "geisha" girls, marked with a heightened femininity, loyal, subordinate, and sexually available.[398] It is telling, that when Betsy is transformed by the Hand, Jubilee, her teammate and a Chinese-American character, is also captured and forced to dress as a geisha as she serves villainous narrative's Mandarin. The Mandarin himself is long running enemy of Iron Man and was constructed around 1960s images of Fu Manchu, the yellow peril, and other orientalist caricatures of Asia and the Far East.

Similar to the discussion surrounding Rogue and her performance as a Southern Belle, the myth of the exotic East and myths of Asian women work to constrain Psylocke with the performance of submissive women who are sexually available for a Western colonial audience. If there was any visual doubt before of Betsy's femininity and gendered designation, her new body removed any doubts. From iteration to iteration, the costume not only shaped the look of the body, but also highlighted and constructed the feminine markings of the body.

The Female Gendered Body

The expectations of the dominant reading position in superhero comics is based on definitions and assumptions about gender. Male/female and masculine/feminine are rooted in hetero-normative, western patriarchal ideas about gender roles and gender performance. Within superhero comics, one of the primary ways to mark a character and communicate their gendered performance in the narrative is through representation and construction of the gendered body. Judith Butler says that patriarchal power structures

---

[398] Sheridan Prasso *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005) p. 53

rely on, "the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances."[399] The idea of "natural" as a descriptor for the appearance of a number of female characters in superhero comics is debatable. However, the way the female body is constructed in superhero comics is a cultivation of a particular image and assumptions about the female body. Those bodies may not look, act, or move natural in comparison to real world bodies, but they are the representation of natural, or normal, for the expectations of the dominant reading position.

To be identifiable and clearly marked, the gendered body in superhero comics becomes hyper gendered. Of course, these ideas of feminine and masculine are constructed around expectations of the dominant position. As Judith Butler points out, gender is primarily constructed from personal, cultural, and historically received meanings.[400] Within comics discourse, bodily indicators become the most easily accessible markers to help identify gender. Once that gender has been identified, how that character will act, what their role is, how they will perform, if they need to be controlled and constrained, and any other number of cultural meanings and expectations flows out of that gendered identification. As intertwined as gender marking and identification has become to the construction of superhero narratives and representation, there is always the fear that the performance can be subverted or imitated, confusing and creating friction within the gender identification.

---

[399] Butler *Theater Journal* op cit. p. 524

[400] Butler *Gender Trouble* op cit pp. 15, 176

In the world outside of comics, one way that visual identification and bodily markers to identify gender is subverted is through the art of drag. Drag performance, and much of the discourse surrounding it, has a strong correlation to superhero narratives and the construction of a body to gain a new identity. For many drag kings and queens, performing drag follows some of the same steps as superheroes and villains take in their path to becoming their new selves. Those getting ready to enter the world of drag often already posses or are working on special skills or powers like dancing, singing, and comedy. When they construct a drag identity, they adopt a particular visual style or fashion aesthetic as their costume. One of the most interesting correlations is the hyper gendered performances that occur when drag stars take on their alternate identities and the hyper gendering of heroes as they put on their costumes.

Like the Hulk ripping out of his shirt to become green and hyper masculine or Jean Grey tossing off her cloak to become the hyper feminine Black Queen, drag queens take to the stage in costumes that help shape their bodies with a particular gendered performance and appearance. Suddenly hyper-feminine, they make sure to perform in a believable facsimile of cultural expectations of femininity. Like with superhero narratives, the newly constructed drag identity is perceived of and treated as a separate and new identity. On the reality TV show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, contestants are seen referencing or presenting their drag persona as a separate and distinct identity. When introducing himself, one of the contestants says, "My name is David. In drag, when I've got on tits and tights, I go by Raven."[401] For other contestant, this delineating of identities

---

[401] Raven/David Petruschin "Gone with the Window" *Rupaul's Drag Race* (Logo: 2 February 2010)

even goes as far as referring to their drag persona in third person. As with the costumed character's in superhero comics, by taking on their new costumes, drag performers also adopt indicators and a performance of gender that is mimicry of a particular culture's hegemonic ideas of what defines those genders. To become Raven, breasts become part of the performance and transformation that David goes through.[402] As part of gendered performance, in superhero comics we also see that making their breasts more pronounced and revealed is what marks Poison Ivy, Psylocke, or Witchblade feminine within their bodily representations and costumes.

The major difference between the gender performances of drag and of superhero costumes is what Judith butler refers to as the pastiche nature of drag. In the hegemonic ideas of gender, the "normal" or "original" ideas are subverted and "revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody."[403] The performances of gender that drag performers present are never meant to be actual representations of gender, but a way of depriving the hegemonic culture of essentialist gender identities. Douglas Wolk points out that within the gendered performances of comics is something similar, "Superman doesn't look like an approximation of the preexisting, culturally defined concept of human perfection but like an exaggeration that goes beyond the ideal and is meant to work on the reptile brain."[404] Like drag, the intention of gendered performance in comics is not to present an exact representation of those performances. However, where drag is subversive by presenting the fact that the

---

[402] It should be noted, like most superheroes, tights become part of the gendered transformation.

[403] Butler *Gender Trouble* op cit p. 176

[404] Wolk op cit p. 65

sex of the individual is separate from the gender being performed, the connection between sex and gender is being reinforced with the costumes, bodies, and performances in comics.

When a character like The Flash, who is sexed male and therefore gendered masculine, is not seen wearing a costume as revealing as Wonder Girl, it transmits a specific and expected meaning to the reader about gender identity and the role of the gendered body in comics. The male body in its costume is supposed to be emulated. It is the active body and it is desirable to have that body. The female body is supposed to be seen and is revealed to the reader. It is the passive body and it is desirable to posses and control that body. These same meanings are also transmitted the way bodies are posed and placed within the individual panels.

When male characters are placed within panels, the parts of their body that are privileged is their head, face, or their muscles. When female characters are placed in a panel, it is their physically female traits that are highlighted and put on display. One recurring trope that occurs with gendered body placement in panels is referred to as the "Over/Under", an unwritten rule of how the point of view of the panel is placed depending on the character's gender.

In the case of the Over/Under, when a character in a panel is presented with their back to the reader, the angle of the point of view changes depending on the gender of the character with their back to the reader. If the character is male, the point of view tends to be higher, looking over one of the male character's shoulders. However, if the character is female, the angle tends to be lower, looking under one of the female character's butt

cheeks. We did look at two examples already of the under with Poison Ivy in Chapter 2 and 4 during her appearances in *Secret Origins*[405] and *Gotham City Sirens.*[406] However, issue 21 of *Gotham City Sirens* gives us a better comparison of the Under with the Over in the same narrative scene. The title page of the issue is one giant panel that includes an Under of Harley Quinn. Though the focus of the panel is the rusty nail that she is holding in her hand, the angel used means that the majority of the panel is focused on her rear. The point of view coming from a low direction, looking up.(Fig. 51)[407] On the next page, the direction of the conversation changes. This time the point of view puts Sergeant Cash's back to the reader. With the change in perspective, the point of view also shifts, taking the reader up and over Cash's right shoulder.(Fig. 52)[408] While the Over/Under is not an absolute, it is the norm and functions to reassure and focus on physical indicators of the gender of the characters in the panel.



Fig. 51 An Under looking past Harley's butt cheek


Fig. 52 An Over looking high and over Cash's shoulder

[405] Gaiman (w) and Buckingham (a) op cit p. 33

[406] Dini (w) and March (a) *Gotham City Sirens* #9 op cit p. 1

[407] Peter Calloway (w) and Andres Guinaldo (a) *Gotham City Sirens* #21 (DC Comics: May 2011) p. 2

[408] ibid p. 3

In superhero comics, gender needs to be signaled and decoded simply and immediately. Any confusion of gender identification is potentially dangerous and destabilizing to patriarchal power. For a character to be trans or appearing in drag in a superhero comic runs the risk of confusing the nature of the gaze and destabilizing expectations of the dominant position. When a character is presented with physical female indicators, the expectation is that the character can be seen, objectified, and sexualized by a male dominant position. However, like in drag, if those female indicators are revealed to be attached to an individual who is biologically male, this creates confusion and anxiety. In a system of dominant and dominated, consumer and consumed, viewer and viewed, gendered indicators are necessary to dictate the performance and roles within that system. To subvert those indicators is to be an enemy agent and source of anxiety. The enemy agent must be exposed and expelled.

One purpose of having costumes that are so revealing is to eliminate any chance that a female character may be hiding something or that the dominant reading position may in some way be tricked or trapped. When a character like Storm in her mohawk and punk costume, or Psylocke in her covering armour, is presented, they can be a source of anxiety and dread that they may not be all that they initially appear to be. Overwhelmingly, those two characters still appear female. The fact that they are not hyper-feminine and their bodies are not hyper sexed or revealed, means that they are shifting too much to a fearful and anxious androgyny. It is this kind of anxiety that is at the source of tropes like trans panic. Within this trope, there is the fear that trans

individuals are out to trick men into sex by appearing and performing feminine.[409] The trans panic trope is so prevalent and real in both media and culture that it has even been used in court cases to defend people who have committed violent acts against trans individuals.[410]

To assuage this false dread and to remove any fear that the hyper-feminine and bodily female are what they communicate, the logonomic system is used to regularly reassert gendered representation. Costumes are redesigned and stripped down while bodies are switched and reshaped to assure the dominant reading position that a physical indicator, such as breasts, always signals female. This is one of the reasons that superhero costumes and the presentation of the female body is obsessed with female breasts.

Broke Backs and Breasts

Through repetition of presentation, the logonomic system works to deliver the dominant reading position a specific and expected image of the female body. This repetitive image of femaleness, framed by the superhero costume and body, transmits ideas about how those characters should be understood and interpreted. If the goal of the costume is to present a recognizable and iconic visual representation of a character, then the bare muscled chest of the Hulk, or broad chest of Superman constitute their strength and define them as physically strong and active. For female characters, the exposed breasts and cleavage constitute their power as sexual things, defining these female

---

[409] Marcy Cook "*Airboy* #2's Transmysoginistic Tropes and Their Dangerous Impact on Trans Women" *The Mary Sue* (3 July 2015) <http://www.themarysue.com/transmisogynistic-tropes-airboy/>

[410] Ave Mince-Didier "Gay Panic Defense" *CriminalDefense Lawyer* (NOLO) <http://www.criminaldefenselawyer.com/resources/gay-panic-defense.html> and Parker Marie Molloy "California Becomes First State to Ban Gay, Trans 'Panic' Defenses" *The Advocate* (29 Sept. 2014) <http://www.advocate.com/crime/2014/09/29/california-becomes-first-state-ban-gay-trans-panic-defenses>

characters by bodily traits. The fact that women in superhero comics are usually endowed with large breasts points to an expectation of the way the dominant reading position views biological indicators of femininity and femaleness. Instead of transmitting information about innate or received powers the way the costumes of male characters do, female characters are defined by visually biological indicators. If the superhero body is the hyper-gendered and idealized body, then the dominant reading position's idealized image of women is buxom almost to a point of caricature and absurdity.

Women in the real world do have naturally large breasts, but within the context of the comic narrative, large breasts - there is little to no representation of small-breasted women within modern comics - become the ultimate definer of femininity and female power. This repetitive representation continues to show a lack of diversity among female representation and body types. Though strength and muscles are a major part of the super powered world, that does not mean that all male characters are drawn or represented as muscular. Even though it may be the dominant presentation of male characters, their physical attributes are not what primarily defines them. Since maleness within a patriarchal power structure is considered to be the default, their physical and biological indicators are secondary to their powers and abilities. Their costumes and bodies reflect their powers, not their gender. However, when female characters are passive objects, meant to be seen and ogled, breasts are important to defining their femaleness and serve as an easily renderable way to define gender, objectivity, and commodification.

Looking back at the 90s Bad Girl designs of Witchblade and Lady Death, the way their breasts are drawn was about size. Along with a number of other female characters of

the time, breast sizes began to increase exponentially. Even the size of Sara Pezzini's large breasts seemed to skew up a cup size or two depending on the artist or how much of her clothing the Witchblade had shredded. "The fetishized breasts are valued as objects, things; they must be solid, easy to handle. Subject to the logic of phallocratic domination of nature, their value, her value as a sexual being, appears in their measurement."[411] If the gendered body of superhero comics is supposed to be the most hyper perfect, idolized, and gendered body, then the perfect female form requires a larger cup size. Because of the West's fetishization of the breast and its correlation to sexuality and value, the most sexual, idolized, and valuable female body is one that is noticeably well endowed.

For the dominant reading position, breasts equal female/feminine. They are the one easily renderable and stable indicator of the gendered body. "Breasts are the most visible sign of a woman's femininity, the signal of her sexuality."[412] Because of that, they have become more noticeable and integral to the rendering of the female body in superhero narratives. As with positioning female characters in the Over/Under to constantly signal gender identity and markings, breasts on a character also become short hand for female/feminine and are placed within the panel as much as possible. While not all female characters have enormous breasts, the norm within comics is to have much larger than normal breasts. "Like most norms of femininity, the normalized breast hardly describes an 'average' around which real women's breast cluster."[413] Superhero comics

---

[411] Iris Marion Young *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford, 2005) p. 78

[412] ibid p. 78

[413] ibid p. 79

do not expect female or male bodies to be rendered and represented as normal as far as the world that surrounds them would dictate. These bodies are a simulacrum that transmits meaning out into the real world about bodies and gender. Breasts, especially large breasts, transmit very specific ideas about sexuality, gender, and value to the dominant reading position. Because the transmission of those ideas are expected and part of how the dominant position receives pleasure in reading the narrative, breasts are important, and the costumed women in the books had better have them.

This emphasis placed on breasts reflects a Western way of seeing the female body and the importance that Western patriarchal cultures have put on breasts. As Iris Young explains, "Capitalist, patriarchal, American, media-dominated culture objectifies breasts before a distancing gaze that freezes and masters. The fetishized breasts are valued as objects, things."[414] The idea that Young presents about freezing the breasts and placing them to be mastered or observed by the dominant gaze is especially apt for examining the bodies and costumes of women in comics. The static nature of comics means that all bodies are essentially frozen in a narrative utterance. Women tend to be frozen in positions that show off their gender and to present themselves to be seen. Frozen in the panel and easily observed, the female breasts, along with her gendered body, can be mastered and controlled. As markers of gender and value female breasts become commodified and a possession of the dominant position. "Woman is a natural territory; her breasts belong to others."[415] Where the muscular body is a fully integrated part of a

---

[414] ibid p. 78

[415] ibid p. 80

male character's power and identity, the female body is more of an item, window dressing, or territory that can be conquered, traded, or reshaped into the desire of the dominant position.

Within a single panel, the female body and her breasts can be presented to be ogled and examined as long as the reader stays in that narrative utterance. Because that single panel is held and responded to by the reader, how the body is positioned transmits very specific ideas about how those characters should be interpreted and constrained. With tropes like the Over/Under, female characters are frequently placed in panels where the point of view works to highlight gendered parts of the female body. The point of view often looks past the curve of their butt or places their breasts and cleavage in centralized positions within the panel. Breasts and feminine curves need to exist to mark femaleness, but maleness does not need to be marked because it is expected and the default gender. Breasts must be part of the costume and the body if the dominant reading position is to understand the iconic visuals of femaleness. Once the body is marked, it is safe and expected to objectify the body. After all, in a patriarchal culture, that is the main purpose of the female body.

The drive to meet the audiences expectations of objectifying, and identifying gender through presentation of the breasts has lead to another artistic trope known as, the "Broke Back Pose. Like the Over/Under, the Broke Back Pose is used to highlight gender as much as possible in any given panel. This term is used to describe any illustration and representation of the female body that contorts her into unnatural or near impossible positions to present as much of her gendered body as possible. In particular, this pose is

used to assure that the breasts are on display, no matter which direction the narrative or action requires the character to be facing.

On the covers of both *Catwoman* #0[416] and *Mighty Avengers* #3(Fig. 53)[417] Catwoman and Tigra are positioned to present the reader with a view of their back sides and cleavage. Their bodies are contorted and manipulated so that the reader is able to see as many biological indicators of their femaleness as possible. Even Black Widow, illustrated with her back to the reader on the *Might Avengers* cover, is turned and twisted enough that the outline of her breast is present just under her arm. The breast becomes so important to how female characters are physically rendered and placed within the narrative, it becomes a primary trait that defines femaleness. To perform normalized femaleness within the superhero comic means being well endowed and exposed. How the female character's costume comes to define the female character's powers and her sexuality is constrained by the importance of her breasts and having her body inscribed with objectified and fetishized femaleness.



Fig. 53 Broke Back Catwoman, Tigra, and Black Widow

---

[416] Ann Nocenti (w) and Adriana Melo (a) *Catwoman* Vol. 4 #0 (DC Comics: November 2012)

[417] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Frank Cho (a) *Mighty Avengers* Vol. 1 #3 (Marvel Comics: July 2007)

The concept of the broke back pose has become so ingrained and part of superhero comics that the trope has found its way off the page and into adaptations of the comics in other mediums. When Marvel Studio's big budget, *Avengers*, film was advertised, character posters were released to highlight the different members of the Avengers team. Scarlet Johansson, as Black Widow and the only female member of the team, was given a character poster that mirrored broke back poses found in comics like *Mighty Avengers*. Because Johansson is a real person, the bending of the back is not as extreme as in many comics.(Fig. 54)[418] The goal of the pose is still the same: to make sure that indicators of femaleness are clear and present. Her back side is prominent and turned to the camera while her arm is positioned and her torso turned enough that the curve of her breast can be seen. This same pose even made it onto the larger movie posters that showed the whole team. All of the male characters were in action/fight ready poses and the one female character was presenting her gender.



Fig. 54 Broke Back Scarlet Johansson

While the Broke Back Poses and oversized breasts may seem strange and out of place, they have become the norm and expected for the female body within superhero comics. The assumption is that this is the way female bodies should look and function.

---

[418] *Marvel's The Avengers* Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Scarlett Johansson. Marvel: 2012.

We can see correlation of this in looking at John Burger's examination of European nudes and that the positioning and manipulation of the female body in the image function to,

> "reassure the men of their sexual power and at the same moment deny any sexuality of women other than the male construction. They are evidence of gendered difference…because any effort to replace the women in these images with a man violates 'the assumptions of the likely viewer'. That is, it does not fit with expectations but transgresses them and so seems wrong."[419]

Websites and blogs have popped up online trying to highlight how this placing of the male body in Broke Back Poses does look ridiculous. One website, *The Hawkeye Initiative*, gained national media attention with individuals submitting their own versions of the male Avenger Hawkeye in the poses and costumes that female characters are frequently subjected to. This was started by female comic artist Noelle Stevenson who also asserted that "to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye doing the same thing."[420] Like Burger suggests, the juxtaposition highlights the ridiculousness of the costumes and poses. However, the attention to how ridiculous it all may be has not really affected mainstream superhero comics or the way female bodies are manipulated and clothed. Like the European nudes, the way women are costumed and their bodies are constructed in superhero comics is to meet the assumptions and expectations of the dominant position. To maintain the

---

[419] Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill* (London: SAGE, 2005) pp. 38-39

[420] Noelle Stevenson "How to Fix Every Strong Female Character Pose" *How are You I'm Fine Thanks* (blog) <http://gingerhaze.tumblr.com/post/37003301441/how-to-fix-every-strong-female-character-pose-in>

position's sense of dominance over the body and how it is constructed and presented needs to be constrained.

If the female superhero and her power is framed by the costume and the focus of the costume is the hyper sexualized body, then female power is lessened and limited in comparison to her male counterparts.The reconstituting of continuity and the introduction of a new costumes is a way to reactivate the expectations and desires of the dominant reading position. Over time, as the dominant position's expectations are reconstituted and reactivated by the logonomic system, new iterations of female costumes become more sexualized.

The Retconned Body

For a character like Starfire, originally created for the young superhero book, *Teen Titans*, her costume was never considered covering. Under her code name Starfire, the alien princess, Koriand'r fought alongside other teenage superheroes like Beast Boy, Nightwing, and Cyborg.[421] Her costume still met expectations by presenting her breasts and gender in a recognizable and easily identifiable way.(Fig 55)[422] Only covered by two purple straps, the outline and shadow of her breasts were still prominent, so the gender identification and clues to her character were still



Fig. 55 Original Starfire design

[421] Marv Wolfman (w) and George Perez (w)(a) *New Teen Titans* Vol. 1 #1 (DC Comics: November 1980)

[422] Marv Wolfman (w) and George Perez (a) *New Teen Titans* Vol. 1 #16 (DC Comics: February 1982)

visually available within the panel. Narratively, her origin and back story even worked to justify such a revealing costume. On her alien home world, the inhabitants never actually wore clothes and the revealing costume she wore was a compromise between the cultures of her planet and Earth.[423]

With the relaunch of DC's New 52, along with many of their other characters, the character and costume of Starfire was redesigned and the expectations of the dominant reading position could be reconstituted and expanded with an even more sexualized body. While her original costume could not be said to cover up much, Starfire's New 52 costume is stripped down and reveals as much body as possible without her being drawn completely naked.(Fig. 56)[424] As with many of the female characters that were retconned in the New 52 initiative, Starfire's costume change is not just about a more revealed body. Since the body and it's gendered markers dictate and constrain aspects of a character's personality and identity, revealing her body and stripping away what little costume she did have marks a change in her personality. The new Starfire has a body that is a major focus of the character and communicates an idea of being more sexually available. Her new body is presented to be sexually available to all men, at all times.


Fig. 56 New 52 Starfire design

[423] ibid p. 8

[424] Scott Lobdell (w) and Kenneth Rocafort (a) *Red Hood and the Outlaws* #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) p. 8

In her first appearance in the New 52, Starfire is presented as near naked as is possible; at one point, even her newly designed costume seems covering in comparison. After being introduced to her alien powers and new costume, the reader next sees Starfire rising out of a tropical ocean. Her hair is flipping back, and her breasts are barely contained by a small purple bikini.(Fig 57)[425] The similarity in design and color between her new costume and the bikini signal to the reader that this is how Starfire's costumes and body will be presented. This is the expected and normalized body now. The reader is given visual access to as much of Starfire's body as possible through the use of mise en page.



Fig. 57 Starfire's new body

The page of Starfire climbing out of the ocean appears as one single large panel, but is broken into three nontraditional panels that are separated by soft frames that are parts of the image themselves. The first panel is a half page panel that separates itself by using the white ripples of the water and sun reflection to create a frame and panel break. The next two panels cut the bottom of the page in half leaving one panel of just Starfire on the left and then a soft frame of the palm tree and other foliage. The final panel contains the young boy resting against the tree, and taking pictures with his camera phone. Using softer frames gives the transitions from one panel to the next a smoother and more porous feel. In the case of this page, it allows the reader

[425] ibid p. 10

to easily move from the two angels and positions that Starfire is in. The two panels feel more connected and so the two angels - high and looking down at her breasts and low looking up at her stomach - become seamless and accessible.


Fig. 58 Starfire as sexual plaything

With the boy taking pictures of Starfire in her swimsuit, the two quick transitioning angels of the previous panels feel like different camera angels or shots of a photoshoot. The mise en page mixed with the presence of the boy functions as instructions in how Starfire's body can be seen and treated. The boy's dialogue also highlights how the female body is perceived. "Uploading now. Internet, here we come!"[426] The female body is not her own. In patriarchal structures, the female body is territory that can be conquered, owned, controlled, and possessed. Starfire's body is not something she owns or can claim ownership of within patriarchal structures. It can be claimed and shared across social media at the whim of even a young boy with a smart phone. She has no say in it and no control of how her body is transmitted, captured, or shared. By the virtue of having an exposed and gendered body, that body is assumed to be available for conquest or commodification. This new version of Starfire is meant to be seen, controlled, and sexually available.

---

[426] ibid p. 10

To further highlight this new Starfire as sexually available, she is also reconstructed as a sexual nymph and object of sexual recreation. This new Starfire has no memory of people or things beyond just a few moments. As her new teammate Jason Todd points out, she has "a terribly short attention span about all things Earth."(Fig. 58)[427] This short attention span means that she is ready and willing to have sex at anytime with anyone.

Though she only just met her other teammate Roy Harper a day before, she asks, "Do you want to have sex with me?"[428] Roy is more than happy to oblige and only asks, "is there anything I need to know about making love to a Tamaranean?" She replies, "Just that love has nothing to do with it."[429] Having sex with Starfire is not an emotional action and there is no connection that she can possible build with another person. Even in asking about her old friends from the Teen Titans, her conversation with Roy shows that she does not have any lasting emotional attachment to her previous friends or loved ones. When asked about her former lover Dick Grayson, she responds blankly, "No."[430]

For Starfire to have and want sex without emotional attachment is not a problematic issue. Most often, patriarchy works to shame women for any sexual desire or drive. At issue is that in this context, she is not an individual making choices about her sexuality. Here, Starfire is simply a body that Roy has sexual access to. Starfire as a character has been reduced to a body to have sex with. The narrative constructs Starfire

---

[427] ibid p. 11

[428] ibid p. 13

[429] ibid p. 13

[430] ibid p. 13

and her body as a tool for male sexual desire. Her personality and her emotions are overshadowed by what her body offers for the male characters and their desires.

Through all of her interactions with Roy and Tim on the island, it is her body that is the focus of the panels. She has been reconstructed as an objectified possession. Roy and Tim's conversations about her are focused on who owns or possesses her. Her ex was Dick Grayson. Is she now with Tim? Is she Tim's girl? Is it okay to have sex with her?[431] Not only is she incapable of creating an emotional connection with anyone, no other characters seem to build emotional connections with her. She is there to be seen, passed around, and used sexually. Her body and her breasts, the way her costume frames them, and how the other fictional characters in the superhero universe perceive her transmits an understanding to the reader that she is an object. She is to be seen for as long and as much as the reader would like.

Through reinforcement and repetition, this is how the female body is perceived in general. For the female body to be presented uncovered is no longer an aesthetic clothing choice, but transmits signals that are decoded as sexually available or promiscuous. Then, when women reject sexual advances, they are labeled as a tease or slut. All because her actions do not meet with the expectations of what that clothing says. Starfire and her body conform to expectations of the dominant reading position and present themselves as gendered performance and are marked and encoded through the gendered body. These performances and expectations become normalized and part of the expectations of the female gendered body both inside and outside of the comic universe.

---

[431] ibid p. 11

Through relaunch and retcon, the logonomic system is capable of reconstituting the desires and expectations of the dominant reading position and the obsession with the hyper feminine body is heightened. Along with Starfire, Harley Quinn, Zatanna, and Voodoo were all given new designs and narratives that accentuated and presented their bodies even more prominently to the reader. Amanda Waller, the heavy set, power suit wearing, government black-ops director was slimmed down and dressed to reveal cleavage and a more normalize body. Before the reboot, Waller was one of the few female characters that did not conform to the ultra sexualized image of femaleness and the female body. Like Psylocke's altered body making her more sexually appealing and exotic, Amanda Waller was also given a new body to fit with expectations of beauty and gendered representation. In Waller's case, she was not given a narrative arch to try and frame the bodily change. Before the New 52 reboot, there was The Wall(Fig. 59)[432] with her large and intimidating stature. After the reboot, there was the trimmer, fitter, and more sexualized Amanda Waller (Fig. 60).[433]



Fig. 59 Amanda Waller Pre-52



Fig. 60 New 52 Amanda Waller

[432] Gail Simone (w) and Jim Calafiore (a) *Secret Six* Vol 3. #26 (DC Comics: December 2010) p. 8

[433] Adam Glass (w) and Federico Dalocchio (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 4 #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) p. 19

When Amanda Waller first came to prominence, it was as the government official in charge of Task Force X, the Suicide Squad.[434] The Suicide Squad was a rotating group of supervillains that, in exchange for time off their prison sentence, were conscripted into undertaking black-ops missions for the US Government. As the leader of the group, Amanda soon earned the nick name "The Wall" because of how tough, intimidating, and impenetrable she was.[435] During her tenure with the Suicide Squad, Waller's character and her body were subversive and counter to the expectations for female characters. Not only was she a heavily set woman, she tended to wear power suits, button up shirts, and her trademark pearl necklace. Her body skewed more androgynous or matronly than hyper feminine. Even the expected markers of female gender were absent when she was placed in panels. During the first issue of *Suicide Squad* Volume 3, she is drawn without pronounced breasts, and she is placed in panels so that the focus is her head and face.[436]

Waller was the unquestioned leader of the different incarnations of the Suicide Squad, often ignoring or defying the orders of her male superiors in government.[437] On top of that, as one of the few prominent black, female characters at DC, her and her body was never exploited with the colonial tropes or fetishism of the exotic or Nubian black body. A stark contrast to the way Psylocke's Asian body became fetishized during a very similar time. However, like Starfire, Wonder Woman, or Harley Quinn, when reboots and

---

[434] John Ostrander (w) and Luke McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #1 (DC Comics: May 1987) p. 13

[435] John Ostrander (w) and Luke McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #10 (DC Comics: February 1988) pp. 1-2

[436] Ostrander (w) and McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* #10 op cit pp. 15-19

[437] John Ostrander (w) and Luke McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #8 (DC Comics: December 1987) pp. 4-5

retcons occur in superhero comics, it is a chance to institute constrained meaning and to expunge subversive and non-normative representations. The importance the hyper feminine body, and its role in marking gender, is vital and even Amanda Waller needed to be altered enough to make her more noticeably female and a more sexual and objectifiable character.

The new Amanda Waller made her first appearance on the final page of the first issue of the New 52 *Suicide Squad*.(Fig. 61)[438] The power suit and pearls are gone, as are a few dress sizes. While the reader does see her face, the focus of the panel is on her button up shirt, unbuttoned enough to give the reader a clear view of her cleavage. While the feminine nature of The Wall could, on occasion, appear as more androgynous or gender neutral, this rebooted and reconstructed Amanda Waller is most definitely female. In line with the changes made to Psylocke and her body, the new Amanda is presented more exotic and fetishisable by a colonial gaze. This Amanda Waller is coloured with a lighter skin tone than The Wall. Lightening her skin tone to make her dark enough to be exotic, but light enough to not be intimidating or unappealing to Western expectations of beauty. The way Waller and her body is presented in those pivotal first issues dictates how the character will be canonized within comics discourse. Until there is another major reboot of DC's line,



Fig. 61 A more fetishized and sexualized Waller

[438] Glass (w) and Dalocchio (a) *Suicide Squad* #1 op cit p. 19

the thin, busty Waller will maintain. Though, even after that, change is often not easily obtained in the face of the logonomic system.

For those future, and inevitable, relaunches, the first issue of a series will dictate how the body and costume will be presented and judged by the dominant reading position. If the female body and costume are constructed in a way that fits with the expectations, it becomes integrated as part of the cannon. If it does not meet that expectation, the logonomic system works to correct and reconstitute a body and costume that is in line with expectations. With the New 52 relaunch, it was decided that Power Girl's boob window would finally be retired and a new costume was revealed.[439] After complaints about the design and declining sales on the Power Girl and Huntress focussed book *World's Finest*, the window came back after only about 12 issues in the new costume.[440] When titles are relaunched and restarted, the expectation is that the first issue needs to get the readers attention. For a female led title, this often means focusing on the gendered body from the very first page.

Silicone Parts and Bodily Manipulation

For both Voodoo and Catwoman their new number one issues marked a chance for new readers to begin reading the book and get to know the identities of these characters. Reiterating DC Comics publisher Dan Didio's comments about the New 52 relaunch, "The goal of the New 52 is to bring in new readers."[441] If the first issues of the

---

[439] Paul Levitz (w) and George Perez and Kevin Maguire (a) *Worlds' Finest* Vol. 5 #1 (DC Comics: July 2012) p. 16

[440] Paul Levitz (w) and Kevin Maguire, Geraldo Borges, Robson Rocha et. al (a) *Worlds' Finest* Vol. 5 #12 (DC Comics: July 2013) p. 14

[441] Itzkof op cit p. 2

new relaunch was about new readers, the focus of both *Voodoo* #1 and *Catwoman* #1 should give indication of what type of new readers DC was trying to attract and the types of female representation these new readers expected.

Voodoo and Catwoman are notable in that they were two characters that were headlining their own books. Unlike Waller or Starfire who were reintroduced as parts of team books, both Catwoman and Voodoo had their names in bold lettering on the cover. As title characters, the first pages of these first issues was how these characters were introduced to new and old readers. For both of these characters, their first pages were focused on their bodies.

The first page of *Voodoo #1* opens with a full page image and the header, "DC Comics proudly presents Voodoo."(Fig. 62)[442] Voodoo herself is on the stage of a strip club, on her hands and knees, looking out towards the reader. Her breasts and cleavage are positioned in the exact center of the large panel and the primary focus of the image. The mise en page is easy to discern here as there is no other panel to take focus off from the opening splash page. This is the primary panel and the one that introduces the main character and places the reader narratively. Because of the construction of the panel, the reader is positioned up against the stage that Voodoo is climbing across. The reader is a seated voyeur and patron at the strip club.



Fig. 62 Introducing Voodoo

[442] Ron Marz (w) and Sami Basri (a) *Voodoo* Vol. 2 #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) p. 1

From page 1, the reader is taught how they should perceive Voodoo and what their role is in relation to her. The reader is there to see, ogle, and objectify. The crumpled and tossed bills on the stage could easily be from the reader and highlights the valuing of Voodoo for what her body is worth. Voodoo's role is to be seen. The relationship between reader and character are automatically set from the title page of the new series. Who Voodoo is and what her powers are are all secondary in comparison to her visible and objectifiable femaleness. At least when readers are first introduced to Starfire, the reader is given indications of her powers as she blows up tanks with energy blasts.[443]

Of the 24 panels in the first five pages of the issue, 14 of those panels place Voodoo and her breasts (in varying states of cover) in the center and as the focus of the panel.[444] At no time in those first few pages does Voodoo speak. She is there to be seen by the customers and by the reader. Other characters are given the chance to speak and all of the information we do have about Voodoo, outside of her being a stripper and what her body looks like, is delivered to the reader by other characters.[445] For all intents and purposes, Voodoo is mute and silent and meant to be seen, not heard. For a new reader, their introduction to the character is a voiceless body moving on a stage. Even when her character does start to form and she begins to speak, it is passive and in reaction to a male character.[446] The first issue of her ongoing series serves to introduce a character and an identity that is exclusively about her body and how she is constructed by a patriarchal

---

[443] Lobdell (w) and Rocafort (a) op cit p. 8

[444] Marz (w) and Basri (a) op cit pp. 1-5

[445] ibid pp. 1-2, 4-5

[446] ibid pp. 12-15, 17

gaze and voice. What she is wearing on the stage is essentially her powered costume. If this costume is supposed to indicate what her powers are, then her powers are to be an object.

This first issue of *Voodoo* meets not only expectations of the gendered body and female performance, it also meets expectations of Voodoo's canonical characterization. Voodoo is unique in that she was a creator owned character made for another comic company, but was eventually sold to DC Comics. During the 50s and 60s, the practice of buying up another company's stable of characters after they had gone out of business or were not profitable was a common practice. DC Comics actually made a habit of buying up companies and characters like Quality Comics, Charlton Comics, and Fawcett, that were home of characters like The Question, Plastic Man, and Captain Marvel. In 1998, DC bought the Image Comics imprint, Wildstorm. With that purchase characters like Voodoo and her original team, WildC.A.T.S would eventually become integrated into the DC Comics Universe.[447]

When Voodoo was first created in the 1990s, she was part of the Bad Girl family of female characters. In being retconned and reconstructed for the DC New 52, her being a striper and first appearing in a strip club is actually consistent with her canonical origin. When she first appears in *WildC.A.T.S* #1, Voodoo is a stripper, on stage at "the hottest strip club in town."(Fig. 63)[448] Voodoo fit into the common mold, particularly at new comic publishers like Image, of female characters who were in someway connected to

---

[447] Tim Leong *Super Graphic:A Visual Guide to the Comic Book Universe* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2013) pp. 26 -27

[448] Brandon Choi (w) and Jim Lee (a)(w) *WildC.A.T.S* Vol. 1 #1 (Image Comics: August 1992) p. 15

sex work, or were sex workers themselves. Along with Voodoo being a stripper, the character Rapture from the comic *Freak Force* was a former hooker,[449] and Youngblood team member Riptide used her fame and notoriety as a crime fighter to pose in a porn magazine called, *Pussycat*.[450] In true 90s comics style, Riptide's photo shoot is presented for the reader in a full page, centerfold shot.[451] If the expectation was that female characters were sexual objects, and that their super powered bodies were primarily used for sex, it seemed logical for them to be involved in the business of sex. Voodoo being a stripper before being recruited into the WildC.A.T.S super team was a normal narrative choice.


Fig. 63 Voodoo's First appearance

Even as part of this hyper sexualized and objectified group of new female characters, the original Voodoo was actually wearing more clothing than her New 52 version did. As with all retcons and relaunches though, the aspects of the character that conform or meet the expectations of the dominant reading position have a better chance of maintaining. White characters tend to stay white, male characters tend to stay male, and professions or costume choices that prioritize the female gendered body

---

[449] Erik Larsen and Keith Giffen (w) and Victor Bridges (a) *Freak Force* #6 (Image Comics: June 1994) p. 17

[450] Eldon Asp (w) and John Stinsman (a) *Team Youngblood* #14 (Image Comics: October 1994) pp. 1, 6

[451] ibid pp. 13-15, 17

find their way back in. If Power Girl's boob window was going to make a return, it seemed logical for Voodoo to stay a stripper.

Even the opening panels of *Voodoo* #1 and their dogged obsession with her breasts and body would not come as a surprise to readers who are steeped in the cannon and history of the character. Even after being found in Washington DC, leaving her job as a stripper, and being recruited into the WildC.A.T.S super team,[452] the focus of Voodoo as a character defaulted to her as a sexualized body. While on a covert mission aboard a cruise ship, the reader is given the opportunity to learn more about the back story of team leader and synthetic being, Spartan. As he tells Voodoo, who is lounging around in her swimsuit and showing off her female gendered body, "I am just an amalgam of biosynthetic components controlled by a silicon-based neurotronic brain"[453] In the next panel, Voodoo responds reassuringly, "Hey, no big deal. You're not the only one around her with silicon parts, big guy."(Fig. 64)[454] To add context to her comment and make sure the reader understands her reference, the panel is built around Voodoo's very ample and noticeable breasts. There should be no



Fig. 64 Voodoo and her silicone breasts

[452] Choi (w) and Lee (a)(w) *WildC.A.T.S* #1 op cit p. 18

[453] Brandon Choi (w) and Jim Lee (a)(w) *WildC.A.T.S* Vol. 1 #8 (Image Comics: February 1994) p. 14

[454] ibid p. 14

misunderstanding for the reader, when Voodoo says she has silicone parts, she means breast implants. Spartan even goes so far as to confirm Voodoo's assertion and uses his x-ray vision to examine her implants.[455]

While this exchange can easily be played off as a joke about sex workers and the discourse surrounding plastic surgery and breast enhancement that had become prevalent with a real life, surgically enhanced, Pamela Anderson gracing TV and magazines, a fuller context of the situation shows how obsessed patriarchal cultures are with specific constructions of the female body. On the boat, both Spartan and Voodoo are wearing bathing suits, and there are panels that show Spartan's muscular and shirtless torso.[456] However, overwhelmingly, Voodoo is placed in panels that draw primary focus to her body. Pages 12 and 13 of the issue has a mise en page constructed as a two page spread with one giant, central panel that allows for Voodoo to be spread out and seen across even



Fig. 65 Voodoo as an objectified centerfold

the fold that marks the separation of pages.(Fig. 65)[457] Like with Starfire in *Red Hood*

[455] ibid p. 14

[456] ibid pp. 15, 16

[457] ibid pp. 12-13

and the Outlaws, Voodoo even has voyeurs in the background. Here it is two college students, openly and obviously staring at Voodoo in the foreground. And like with the boy taking pictures of Starfire, the two men here give the reader permission to look. That is what is expected. Even the narrative knows that is what the reader is already doing. Though context lets the reader know that she is talking to Spartan, her question of, "So what're you looking at?"[458] can just as easily be directed at the reader. It is not accusatory or shaming, it is acknowledgement that the mise en page is functioning. The goal of the pages is to meet the expectations of the dominant position and it's need to see and in some way control the female gendered body.

The expectation and desire to have the female body so completely revealed and viewable creates panels and comics that can, at times, look more like a "lad mag", with their centerfolds and pull out posters, than sequential art. In an earlier issue of *WildC.A.T.S*, when the character Zealot is introduced, the reader has to turn the comic sideways to properly view the huge, single panel, two page spread of her properly.[459] While it all may seem a bit much, this falls within the bodily expectations of the dominant position. The female body needs to be constructed, formed, and maintained. Controlling, constraining, and forcing the appearance and shape of the female body, communicates specific ideas about male dominance and female submission. As Michel Foucault points out, "developments of power are directly connected to the body - to

---

[458] ibid p. 12

[459] Choi (w) and Lee (a)(w) *WildC.A.T.S* #1 op cit pp. 25-26

bodies, functions [and] physiological processes."[460] Patriarchal power is expressed through control and conquest of the female body.

For the female body to be worthy of conquest and control, it must be constructed to reflect patriarchal expectations of beauty and sexual attractiveness. As Naomi Wolf asserts, beauty is "a currency system…like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact."[461] by commodifying and objectively monetizing the female body, it becomes an easily consumable, controllable, and posable thing. Regardless of the time era, politics, or culture, patriarchal authority has worked to force a specific image of beauty and the ideal female body. With that image comes the requirement for women to have their bodies sculpted, shaped, and reconstructed to match that image.

For almost a thousand years in China, the binding and breaking of women's feet was part of creating a body that was constructed and moved like a symbol of eroticism and beauty.[462] And in the Victorian age, the corset became a popular tool to literally mold the female body into a social ideal. Corsetry "was a crucial physical and psychological vector in the maintenance of female subjectivity and class identity"[463] For those Chinese or Victorian women to be culturally normalized and accepted, their bodies had to be

---

[460] Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge: Vol. 1*. (Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2008) p. 151

[461] Naomi Wolf *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) p. 12

[462] Hong Fan *Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom: The Liberation of Women's Bodies in Modern China* (London: F. Cass, 1997) p. 45

[463] Leigh Summers *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) p. 19

sculpted, reformed, and reshaped to fit with expectations of bodily beauty. It was only with those altered bodies that they could gain cultural value.

Within the superhero narrative, like the Chinese or Victorian bodies, the powered female body is expected to conform to specific forms and cultural constructions of beauty, eroticism, and sexuality to be considered valuable. A heavy set Amanda Waller does not conform to ideas of traditional beauty, but the retconned Waller has a body that is reshaped and redesigned to make her more valuable. Before her body was changed, Psylocke was not a popular character. By putting her through the "body shoppe,"[464] Psylocke came out the other side Asian, exotic, sexual, and more popular.

Voodoo and the other Bad Girls were constructed to meet expectations of beauty and bodily perfection that reflected cultural tastes and desires of the 90s.[465] Voodoo and others exemplified the type of woman that would enhance or let her body be altered to fit into the expected shape the culture defined as beautiful. Voodoo had her "silicone parts" and Vogue, another member of Youngblood, was referred to in the comic as the "babe with the silicone chest."[466] To be a female superhero or villain, to have a powered body, also means to have a body that conforms to an expected bodily shape. To have a costume that reveals or accentuates that body gives constant access to the body. Since the female character is rated and valued based on the body, her body is her primary commodity.

---

[464] Claremont (w) and Lee (a) *Uncanny X-Men* #256 op cit p. 14

[465] Madrid op cit p. 284

[466] Eric Stephenson (w), Chap Yaep (A) and Rob Liefeld (w)(a) *Team Youngblood* #9 (Image Comics: May 1994) p. 14

Once the body is considered acceptable or normal, then other aspects of female identity can be constructed.

Here Kitty Kitty

While more action oriented and given more of a voice than both of the introductions to Voodoo, Selina Kyle, a.k.a Catwoman, is introduced over four panels, scrambling through her apartment and trying to put her costume on. The content of the panels is structured to repeatedly draw the reader's attention to Selina's red bra.(Fig. 66)[467] While not centered the way the opening of *Voodoo* is, the art and color choices are made to juxtapose a dark and muted color palette with the only bright color in the panels. The opening pages of *Catwoman* are colored with dark blues, grays, and blacks as the primary palate of the panels. Selina's bra, however, is colored in a bold red that stands out against all of the dark coloring. Throughout the page, despite the actual focus of the panel, the red bra is there to draw the readers attention to her breasts. Even in the final panel of the page, where the focus is obviously on the large number of cats that Selina is trying to herd into a pet carrier, the red peeks down from the top of the panel.



Fig. 66 Catwoman getting dressed

[467] Judd Winick (w) and Guillem March (a) *Catwoman* Vol. 4 #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) p. 1

In her introductions, Voodoo is denied a full identity and personality and constructed primarily around her body when she is made voiceless throughout the issue. Voodoo is talked about by characters that are seeing her and is introduced to the reader as a voiceless body. For Selina, the focus on her body is accomplished by dismembering her form. Throughout the opening panels, Selina has no head. The panels are rendered to make sure that the frame cuts her off just around the chin, giving the reader full red lips to go with the red bra. A page later, when the men that Selina is try to escape from break through the door, the reader sees their faces before we see Selina's. The first time we do see her face is as she jumps from her window. She is only partially in her costume. The red of the bra is still there, peaking out of an unzipped costume and drawing the reader's attention and focus to her breasts.[468]

The dismemberment of Selina's body is similar to how Barbara is pulled apart and positioned with only bits and pieces of her in the panels and pictures in *The Killing Joke*. One of the functions of the panel is to draw focus and the reader's attention to important narrative moments or sequences. The same way a close up or lingering shot indicates to the viewer things they should note in a film, the contents of the panel communicates to the reader what is important or of value. Since the text of a comic is not just reportage or a description of the panel's contents, the paradigmatic choices of what is in a panel is integral to communicating the narrative. If a male character is placed in panels with the focus on their powers, face, and icons of identity, that tells the reader that those are the important things they need to understand about the character and how that character

---

[468] ibid p. 3

becomes defined. Overwhelmingly, female characters are placed in panels to highlight their bodies. This tells the reader that the female gendered body is the most important and valuable information about that character. The Over/Under, Broke Back Poses, panel dismemberment, and the plethora of other ways the female body is positioned, contorted, manipulated, and reshaped within comic panels communicates a specific idea of how those characters should be seen and understood.

Within reboots and relaunches of titles, the logonomic system has the opportunity to reinforce these old tropes of bodily manipulation. Voodoo and Catwoman's bodies are presented and introduced to new readers unclothed, stripped. In comparison, all of the major male heroes in their relaunch books are shown in their full costumes with Batman's cowl, Superman's S-shield, Aquaman's trident, and Green Lantern's ring on display and marking how the reader should know and recognize those characters.[469] Even before the first issues of the New 52 arrived in comic shops, DC and their creators were giving interviews to assure the dominant reading position that their pleasure was being taken care of. In one interview, writer Judd Winick let readers know that *Catwoman* would be sexy, sexy, sexy. Sexy being the term he uses almost a dozen times to describe the character.[470]

Along with the interview, DC also released the image of the cover to *Catwoman* #1. Selina is posed lounging back on a rooftop, her catsuit costume shaping and

---

[469] Geoff Johns (w) and Ivan Reis (a) *Aquaman* Vol. 7 #1, Grant Morrison (w) and Rags Morales (a) *Action Comics* Vol. 2 #1, Scott Snyder (w) and Greg Capullo (a) *Batman* Vol. 2 #1, and Geoff Johns (w) and Doug Mahnke (a) *Green Lantern* Vol. 5 #1 (DC Comics: November 2011) Covers

[470] Judd Winick, interviewed by Vaneta Rogers *Newsarama* (11 June 2011) <http://www.newsarama.com/7787-winick-returns-to-gotham-for-sexy-violent-dcnu-catwoman.html>

constructing her idealized body. Long legs, thin waist, and large breasts that are exposed thanks to her being partially unzipped. Already she is in the act of stripping off her costume, her boots and cowl already discarded, as she pours a bag of diamonds onto her chest.(Fig. 67)[471] If the cover and the first two pages were not enough to meet the expectations of the dominant position, 10 of the 20 pages of the story let the reader see Selina's bra,[472] and the final four pages includes her having sex with Batman.[473] For a costumed superhero, Catwoman spends at least half of her time out of, or on the way out of, her costume. If these first images and issues denote the costume, identity, power, and perception of the characters, then new readers can assume that the costumes for Catwoman and Voodoo consist mostly of lingerie and underwear. Their primary powers include bodily contortion and fulfilling male desire, and their identities are completely focused around their hyper sexualized, gendered, and stripped bodies.



Fig. 67 Cover to the New 52 *Catwoman* #1

If we look again at Richard Reynold's argument that "a costume can be 'read' to indicate an individual hero's character or powers,"[474] and the costume is to be read as an

---

[471] Winick (w) and March (a) *Catwoman* #1 op cit. Cover

[472] ibid pp. 1,3,4,11-12,16-20

[473] ibid pp. 17-20

[474] Reynold's op cit p. 26

indication of a hero's character, then what indication does the audience receive when the costume is designed to highlight gender over anything else? What if that costume is essentially just underwear or lingerie? The defining characteristic of these characters is their breasts, the biological definers of their femaleness, and their idolized bodies. These bodies come coded with information about how that character will act. Specifically, that the female character will be performing her gender in the hegemonic, normalized way.

While male characters' costume changes add armour or make them more formidable combatants, their primary trait is their powers, how they got their powers, and how that is reflected in their costume. For female heroes, their femaleness is primary. Everything else flows out of their being female, their being seen, and their being, both figuratively and literally, stripped. since their femaleness is their dominant characteristic, the dominant reading position must see a body that is constructed female, and constructed to reflect ideas of beauty, sex, and eroticism. Their bodies are possessions of the patriarchy, constructed, designed, and reimagined to provide the optimum amount of visual pleasure. They are constructed submissive and willing, their hyper sexualized bodies wrapped in costumes that accentuate and reveal the fetishized, primal indicators of femaleness. They are territory to be conquered, controlled, traded, and used. the primary object of female objectification and fetishization, their breasts.

With their powers signaling a particular, constrained, type of sexuality and sexual identity and their costumes reflecting that constrained sexualized power and objectification, female characters can be reborn into their new superpower identity. They are no longer mild-mannered. With patriarchal permission, they can now be part of the

super powered world. But like with their powers and their costumes, this new identity is subject to patriarchal authority and power. To enter into the super powered world, to be reborn, they need the help and control of male power to construct and define that identity and to frame the way that female identity can be understood.

Chapter 6 - Identity

Identity is a central and vital part of superhero comics, fiction, and narrative. Superheroes and villains are presented as larger than life, mythic beings fighting mythic battles. The identities that they adopt to either fight or commit crimes is vital to how these characters are defined and recognized. They have secret, masked, powered, and powerless identities. The secret identity, one of the earliest tropes of the superhero genre, is the powerless, or mild-mannered identity. This identity is the one that heroes and villains start out with and the one they put back on so they can have a life without their nemesis or arch enemy intervening. While Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin, is trying to kill Spider-Man and Daredevil, he does not think much about Peter Parker or Matt Murdock. While these identities are important to the construction of a particular character, the narrative is most concerned with their costumed and powered identities. It is these identities that mark the characters as being able to function in the super-powered world. Dr. Stephen Strange is out of place as demons invade Greenwich Village, but Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, is not. Through the loss or removal of their old identity - Clark Kent sheds his glasses and tie to become Superman, while Mark Spector puts on his white hood and cape to become Moon Knight - these characters take on their powered, costumed, and iconic identities and are elevated above the nameless individuals inhabiting their fictional cities. These new identities are constructed through the acquisition of powers, a costume, and often as a response to trauma.

As we have seen in the past two chapters, the path to becoming a superhero or villain is contingent on the individual receiving power. With their power in mind, a costume is constructed to reflect those powers. Once the power and costume exist, these characters are able to be reborn and begin a new life with a new identity. This identity is a reflection of their powers and the new image of their costumed body. However, as with powers and the body, the construction of female identity is dependent on male authority. Female identity is constrained by a male authority that functions as a gate keeper into the super-powered world. Even with those constraints, one similarity that exists within the construction of identity is both male and female identities are often defined by a specific trauma. Not only does this trauma dictate how the reader comes to understand a character, the trauma also functions to spur a character to create their new identity and direct it down a heroic or villainous path. With characters like The Hulk or Daredevil, their trauma gives them powers and leads them down the path of heroics. Characters like Poison Ivy and Mr. Freeze experience trauma that make them villains.

As a trope of the genre, trauma is a catalyst to give a character powers or send them on a quest for power. Bruce Banner is caught in a gamma bomb explosion, Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered, Elektra Nachios' father is assassinated, and Poison Ivy is injected with toxins. The trauma that a character experiences, like Matt Murdock being covered in toxic waste, may be what bestows power on them. The trauma is also what sends characters like Dr. Strange to seek power and causes characters like Spider-Man to use their powers for good. Whichever course the trauma leads to, it is connected to power and the first step to a identity.

Without some sort of power - military training, freeze guns, heat vision, super strength - it is impossible to function within the superhero world. Once power is obtained, a costume is constructed and a new identity can be formed. With new powers, comes a new costume, which forms a new identity. Though these heroes had a life before, once they receive their power, they are reborn into new identity. This new identity is created and constructed to reflect their powers and abilities and makes them iconic. As a bat crashes through his window, Bruce Wayne decides, "I will become a bat."[475] Bruce's new identity of Batman is fashioned from his decision and chance encounter. When Peter Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider and develops new powers, he also constructs a new identity. Peter Parker decides that "Since I have the powers of a spider, I'll design myself a spider costume."[476] Spider powers beget a spider costume and Peter Parker is reborn into his new identity of Spider-Man. Once these identities are formed and constructed the new identity often supplants the old one.

No One Must Ever Know Who I Really Am

A new identity means the hero or villain can become a new person. Scott Bukatman says, "The acquisition of costume, mask, and logo might constitute a symbolic birth, or rebirth."[477] While these heroes may take off their costumes and try to live normal lives, they have been born into a new identity that takes precedence. No matter how many of Aunt May's wheatcake breakfasts he misses, or times he botches a date with Mary Jane

---

[475] Frank Miller (w) and David Mazzucchelli (a). op cit p. 22

[476] Stan Lee (w) and Steve Ditko (a). *Amazing Fantasy* #15 op cit p. 6

[477] Scott Bukatman *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University, 2003) p. 55

or Gwen Stacy, Peter Parker's role as Spider-Man is always more important. For superheroes and villains who have duel identities, the friction between those two identities is a common source of narrative conflict and drama. If Peter Parker tries to abandon his new identity, it is understood he will eventually go back to being Spider-Man. Even characters who see their new identities and powers as a curse end up returning to their powered and costumed identities.

Though The Hulk is a stupid, angry, destructive version of the peaceful and super intelligent Bruce Banner the narrative finds a way to put him back in the green hulking body. A major aspect of the stories surrounding the first family of superheroes, The Fantastic Four, is trying to return the hulking, rock skinned Ben Grim - aka The Thing - back into his human form. Despite the romantic and emotional pain it causes, Ben eventually reverts back to his identity as The Thing. Jennifer Walters eventually chooses to be She-Hulk all of the time, even though that means permanently having green skin and enemies after her. Expectations of the genre insists that once characters have constructed their new life and identity, that they can never really leave it behind. This point is proven for Peter Parker in the famous "No More Spider-Man" story in *Amazing Spider-Man* #50.

With his grades declining, no time to go on dates, a Sick Aunt May, and J. Jonah Jamason branding his alter ego a menace, Peter Parker realizes "so long as I hang onto my Spider-Man identity I haven't time for anything, except new problems."(Fig. 68)[478] Throwing his costume, the external and iconic symbol of his new identity, into the trash,

---

[478] Stan Lee (w) and John Romita (a) *Amazing Spider-Man* Vol. 1 #50 (Marvel Comics, July 1967) p. 5

he vows to never be Spider-Man again. However, by becoming Spider-Man, his old identity became supplanted and it is no longer who he really is. Reminded of the trauma of his Uncle Ben's murder that caused him to become Spider-Man, Peter proclaims, "Now, at last, it's all crystal clear to me once more. I can never renounce my Spider-Man identity. I can never fail to use the powers which a mysterious destiny has seen fit to give me."[479] While Spider-Man's mantra may be "With great power, comes great responsibility,"[480] the inevitability of his powers is far more literal within the superhero narrative. With new powers comes a costume, and with that costume comes a new identity.



Fig. 68 Peter Parker throws away his Spider-Man Identity

One of the major plot points of the 2006 Marvel crossover, *Civil War*, revolved around Peter Parker revealing to the world that he was Spider-Man.[481] Narratively, the need for Peter Parker to have a secret identity was so strong that the very next year the knowledge of Peter Parker being Spider-Man was wiped from the worlds memory.[482] As a major trope of superhero narratives, the maintenance of the distinct, powered, and costumed identity is vital to how the superhero genre is perceived.

---

[479] ibid p.18

[480] Lee (w) and Ditko (a) op cit p. 11

[481] Mark Millar (w) and Steve McNiven (a) *Civil War* Vol. 1 #2 (Marvel Comics, August 2006) pp. 21-23

[482] J. Michael Straczynski (w) Joe Quesada (a) *Spider-Man: One More Day* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008)

For some characters, the rebirth into their new identity means their old identity is completely destroyed. In the case of the Fantastic Four their old lives are simply discarded, making it impossible for them to return to who they were before their powered rebirth. Often these characters never adopt a secret identity. The identity that they are reborn into becomes all consuming and the only identity the character has. Once She-Hulk decides to always be She-Hulk, everyone knows who she is. She continues to practice law and shows up to the courthouse as large, green, power suit wearing Jennifer Walters. Reed Richards is publicly known as Mr. Fantastic and makes no pretext to hide who he and his family are. Frank Castle, The Punisher, has no secret identity. He has no mask and he does not try to hide his face.

For Frank Castle, the process of his rebirth into his Punisher identity is a result of the trauma of his old identity and life being destroyed. Though his origin has shifted slightly over time, the murder of his wife and children by criminals. leads to his creating The Punisher identity. Frank is reborn as the black-clad, skull-wearing, military trained vigilante who hunts down and kills criminals in New York.[483] There is no secret identity for Frank. Once he puts on his costume and begins to use his powers in the superhero world, that is all he has. Like Spider-Man and Batman, Frank creates a new identity for himself that mirrors his powers and persona. Armed with guns of every make and description and his chest emblazoned with an iconic white skull, he is reborn into his grim reaper-like identity.(Fig. 69)[484]

---

[483] Gerry Conway (w) and Howard Chaykin (a) *Marvel Preview* #2 (Marvel Comics: January 1975)

[484] Garth Ennis (w) and Lewis Larosa (a) *Punisher* Vol. 6 #1 (Marvel Comics: March 2004) Cover


Fig. 69 The heavily armed Punisher

Where Batman's costume represents his identity as a nocturnal vigilante and his stealthy fighting skills, Frank is reborn into an identity that is death. By constructing their new identities, these characters take active part in their own "ex-utero procreations."[485] They are given agency and choice in the process of their rebirth. They fashion, create, and name their new self, birthing their new identities through their own experiences. However, as with powers and costumes, the construction of super-powered identities has different rules across gendered lines.

Who Was That Masked Woman?

Female identity, as with female power and sexuality, needs to be shown constrained and controlled by already existing patriarchal power and identity. For the dominant reading position to understand female identity, that identity needs to be constrained and interpreted through male experience. While Batman, Spider-Man, and The Punisher are active in the creation of their identities, female characters are once again placed in passive roles. Not only are they passive in the creation of their identities, but also in the trauma and events that cause their rebirth. Where male characters are capable of initiating their own entrance into the super-powered world, female characters are required to stand outside that world until male authority allows them access. Female identities are constructed, formed, and defined by male experience. This reenforces a

[485] Bukatman op cit p. 49

hierarchal power structure that leaves female characters dependent on male identities for existence, autonomy, and recognition. When female identities are formed outside patriarchal control, those identities are taken away, redefined, or constrained by patriarchal power.

Where male characters are allowed to be active in the ex-utero procreation and rebirth of their identities, female characters are dependent on male influence in their rebirth. They are made passive in their ability to enter into the super powered world. This hierarchal structure serves to reinforce and reactivate male dominance and power within the superhero narrative. Even though the female characters are powered, they are dependent on male power to be allowed into the superhero world. They also require patriarchal authority to define their role and function in that world. While everyone is powered, male power is superior because it dictates and defines who can be a superhero. Giving men exclusive control of identity also centralizes all potential power into a patriarchal structure. This excludes women from the possibility of creative independence and the role of teacher or mentor. Making female rebirth dependent on male power serves to "transfer issues of birth and identity from the field of maternal power to the realm of the patriarchy."[486] For many female characters their new identities are offshoots and derivations of already existing male identities. Batgirl, Batwoman, Supergirl, She-Hulk, Kate Bishop, and X-23 are all female versions of already existing male characters. For these characters, the symbolic and iconic nature of the male characters that already exists is permanently marked on their identity and places them subordinate to the male icon.

---

[486] ibid p. 50

Batgirls Eternal

Over the course of publication, Batman has had a number of young male sidekicks donning the identity of Robin. Never has Batman been accompanied by a Bat*boy* or Bat*kid.* For the men in Batman's inner circle, identity can exist and form separately from his patriarchal authority. However, women are labeled as derivations of the bat. Not only are these female characters required to have an identity that is dependent on male authority, it is an identity that is easily interchangeable. Being a Batgirl is not a permanent position. Eventually injury, death, brainwashing, or continuity reboots force the mantel to be passed on to the next female character. While the role of Robin is also a transitory identity, it is part of the male character's journey to being reborn into a new self constructed identity. While there has been a female Robin,[487] she has the notoriety of being the only Robin fired from the position.[488] The Batgirl identity is one that is constructed, controlled, and approved of by the patriarchal role of Batman. It is an identity that is created and maintained with male experience in mind.

To understand the identity of a Batgirl is simplified since it is constructed Batman drawn biologically female. Female autonomy, choice, and individuality is removed from the identity in favor of an identity that is derived from and already existing male identity. This is one of the expected gender performances of women in Batman's world. Instead of being individuals, they are second string to Batman and his side kicks. To try and form their own identity is seen as subversive to the expected performance and power structure.

---

[487] Technically there have been two female Robins. The other, Kate Kelley is part of the alternate future world of Batman and *The Dark Knight Returns*

[488] Bill Willingham (w) and Damion Scott (a) *Robin* Vol. 2 #128 (DC Comics: September 2004)

As the lone female Robin, Stephanie Brown subverts her expected gender performance. To assuage the subversion of expectation and the dread it creates, the narrative normalizes Stephanie by having her fired as Robin, tortured near to death, and finally returning to the Bat-family as Batgirl. The narrative punishes and then normalizes her for her subversive and transgressive performance. While it may seem unique for a female Bat character to be normalized in this way, Barbara Gordon, the first modern age Batgirl, is similarly normalized and returns to the Batgirl identity after having created an identity separate and outside of Batman's control.

After being shot and paralyzed by The Joker in *The Killing Joke*, Barbara was officially retired from her identity as Batgirl.[489] Instead of vanishing from the pages of comics, Barbara was reintroduced in *Suicide Squad* with a new name and identity. When she is first introduced to readers as Oracle,[490] the computer hacker and information broker, her gender, history, and identity are not fully revealed. Over two years of publication, the writers teased out and dropped clues to the identity of the mysterious computer genius. Barbara's new identity as Oracle is one that is constructed and dependent on her experiences. Her powers of a didactic memory, computer skills, and intelligence are all specific to her. Her powers were not given to her through a male source and her actions as a hero and crime fighter are not dependent on male authority or permission. Her rebirth and identity is all accomplished by herself and a little matriarchal nudging. Barbra tells herself, "You wanted to be a superhero again so you created a

---

[489] Moore (w) and Bolland (a) op cit p. 17

[490] John Ostrander and Kim Yale (w) and Luke McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #23 (DC Comics: January 1989) p. 16

computer version and called yourself Oracle."[491] As Oracle, Barbara created an identity that is constructed outside of the old hierarchal system that defined her as Batgirl.

When Barbara is uncertain if she has made the right choice or belongs in the superhero world, she is reinforced and given matriarchal support by Amanda Waller.[492] Her rebirth into her identity of Oracle is a matriarchal ex-utero procreation. The narrative that cemented Barbara and her identity as Oracle into DC Comics cannon is unique in that it introduces a female/female dynamic to the creation of identity. In a fictional world that is structured around male mentors, trainers, and teachers, *Suicide Squad* and the introduction of Oracle was a uniquely subversive narrative and comic series. Amanda Waller - bodily subversive as well as transgressive to the expectations of gender performance - acted as a friend and support to another female character who was constructing a superhero identity. This created a rare moment in comics of the 80s. At a pivotal moment in deciding what type of hero she is going to be, Barbara has the help of Amanda Waller to defeat the bad guy and deal with her unique trauma.[493] In answer to the question posed by Virginia Woolf in Chapter 3,[494] this was a moment that had two unique female characters with self constructed identities relating and bonding with each other without the necessity of patriarchal influence. "I think we can be a help to each other,"[495] Amanda tells Barbara. Barbara responds,"You saved my life and helped keep me from

---

[491] John Ostrander and Kim Yale (w) and Steve Lightle (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #48 (DC Comics: December 1990) p. 11

[492] Steve Ostrander and Kim Yale (w) and Luke McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1 #49 (DC Comics: January 1991) p. 21

[493] ibid pp. 19-21

[494] Woolf op cit p. 78

[495] Ostrander, Yale (w) and McDonnell (a) *Suicide Squad* #49 op cit p. 21

taking a life. All right Miss Waller."[496] By the standards of Kelley Sue DeConnick's Sexy Lamp Test and the Bechdel Test, Barbara's ex-utero rebirth passes. It is little wonder that both of these characters were eventually normalized through the logonomic system.

During her time as information broker, Barbra does a similar job for Batman. Barbara's identity is still hers and constructed through her experiences. She goes on to form and lead an all female team of heroes, the Birds of Prey, and works to train other Batgirls and young female superheroes.(Fig. 70)[497] In this identity, she subverts the constraints of female performance. In patriarchal cultures, men and male authority are presented as the source of power and knowledge. Male authority is required for women to understand themselves, their identity, and their positions in the cultural power structures. By becoming a mentor and a teacher Barbara subverts her expected performance by taking a role that traditionally belongs to Batman. However, though Barbara trains new Batgirls, those women still need Batman's permission to become crime fighters in Gotham. the Batgirl title is one constructed by Batman's authority and can be bestowed and moved based on his whims. These decision are made with no regard for those that have previously held the title or level of training they have received.


Fig. 70 Oracle leading the Birds of Prey

---

[496] ibid p. 21

[497] Gail Simone (w) and Joe Bennett (a) *Birds of Prey* Vol. 1 #83 (DC Comics: August 2005) Cover

In the 1999 crossover event series *No Man's Land*, Gotham City is hit with a major earthquake, leading the US government to evacuate the city as best they can before sealing off and isolating the city and its remaining inhabitants.[498] Oracle and a new Batgirl are two of the people who decide to remain in Gotham. This new Batgirl works to stop crime and reign in the warring factions of criminals, gangs, and looters. When Batman returns to take back his city he confronts this new Batgirl. Her face is completely covered by her cowl, hiding any other identity. "And the costume?"[499] Batman asks, seeing his logo on her chest. Her response highlights Batman's role as ultimate authority and gatekeeper to the title of Batgirl. "I don't have to wear it. But it's a powerful image. Primal. Mythical. Works very well. Still, if you tell me to take it off, I will."[500] This Batgirl, like all the other Batgirls, has to defer to Batman's authority. As women, they can not control or construct what the Batgirl identity is, they must submit to Batman's power and and if he says no, then they can not be Batgirl.

This new Batgirl performs to expected gender roles that place her as dominated to the patriarchal power of Batman as dominant. If Batman had told her to remove the symbol and identity, the expectation is that she would have. This Batgirl eventually just asks for patriarchal permission: "Then…I'm 'approved'?"[501] Batman's response shows that his authority allows him to give and take away the symbol and its accompanying

---

[498] Chuck Dixon (w) and Jim Aparo (a) *Batman* Vol. 1 #560 (DC Comics: December 1998) p. 9

[499] Bob Gale (w) and Alex Maleev (a) *Batman* Vol. 1 #563 (DC Comics: March 1999) p. 23

[500] ibid p. 23

[501] ibid p. 23

identity. “No. But you’re not disapproved.”[502] Batman will let her carry on for now, but the identity of Batgirl is not hers. The title belongs to Batman and can be moved from woman to woman based on his whims.

Later in the series when Oracle sees Batman fighting alongside the new Batgirl she confronts him. “Someone else is out there being *me.* How dare you. How dare you do this to me.”[503] In response to Barbara’s accusations, Batman reminds her of the gendered relationship within the patriarchal power structure, “You know it wasn’t as simple as that.”[504] Barbara though refuses to accept Batman’s patriarchal authority at face value, “No! No I don’t know. I only know that some other woman is out there, some other woman that isn’t me. Some other woman with my legs, my identity.”[505] Barbara’s refusal to accept Batman’s authority aside, the narrative has already constructed the expectations of the Batgirl identity. Even when Barbara was Batgirl, it was not her identity. Without Batman’s permission and authority to have it legitimized or “approved,”[506] she could not have been Batgirl. The identity and it’s space in the superhero world can be shifted from woman to woman and Batgirl to Batgirl. Femaleness, and it’s biological indicators, is all that is necessary to define a Batgirl. It is a female version of Batman, meant to help Batman when he asks.

---

[502] ibid p. 23

[503] Greg Rucka (w) and Frank Teran (a) *Detective Comics* Vol. 1 #732 (DC Comics: May 1999) pp. 17, 19

[504] ibid p. 17

[505] ibid p. 17

[506] Gale (w) and Maleev (a) op cit p. 22

In Naomi Wolf's book, *Promiscuities*, she points out that in traditionally male and patriarchal systems and disciplines, that "young men were meant to take the older men's places, but the young women were chosen to be handmaids or forgotten."[507] In the Patriarchal structure of Batman and Gotham City, these same rules apply. Men have been able to replace Batman without specific permission or approval. These men have been able to create their own unique Batman identities. Jean-Paul Valley,[508] Dick Grayson,[509] and even most recently, Commissioner Gordon[510] have all taken on the mantel of Batman. For the women of Gotham City, however, they are there to be helpmates. Their identities as Batgirl or Batwoman is tied into how that role could be perceived by the dominant reading position. Barbara and all the Batgirls that have followed her have been replaced or forgotten. As Oracle though, Barbara had constructed her own identity that was not dependent on Batman's authority.

Within the highly patriarchal world of Gotham Oracle played a subversive role. She represented a space of female authority, power, and autonomy. However, Oracle is also a source of fear and dread by existing in opposition to the expectations of the dominant reading position. The concept of a woman capable of defining herself and the instrument of her own ex-utero procreation is a source of dread. If her identity and rebirth are possible without male intervention, then patriarchal power is limited in her existence and experience. This perceived loss of power causes anxiety at the potential that women

---

[507] Wolf *Promiscuities* op cit p. 206

[508] Doug Moench (w) and Jim Aparo (a) *Batman* Vol. 1 #500 (DC Comics: October 1993)

[509] Tony S. Daniel (w)(a) *Batman: Battle for the Cowl* #3 (DC Comics: July 2009)

[510] Scott Snyder (w) and Greg Capullo (a) *Batman* Vol. 2 #41 (DC Comics: August 2015)

are capable of defining themselves outside of the hetero-male normative restraints and definitions of gender. It is because of this that the narrative must eventually work to absorb the fear and dread through the logonomic system.

DC Comic's New 52 relaunch served to reactivate the dominant position and it's expectations of Barbara. Her time and identity as Oracle was effectively erased. In the new Batgirl series, Barbara is once again subsumed into the bat centric identity dependent onBatman to define her. Barbara is normalized to the expectations of the audience, and properly placed within Gotham's patriarchal hierarchy. She is no longer a source of fear or dread as a female character that is dependent on male authority. Her experiences and stories are now normalized to the expected gendered performances of a female version of Batman.

That's Not a Batman. That's a Bat*Woman*

Not only are the female identities in Batman's world dependent upon his identity and authority, but they are also subject to patriarchal scrutiny and evaluation. In the cases of both the original Batwoman and the modern reinterpretation of the character, their identities are scrutinized and devalued by their male counterparts. This asserts the idea that without male permission, women's identities are not as real or active as male identity. In the case of Kathy Kane, the perception is that as a female crime fighter who has not been approved of by Batman she is unskilled, ineffective, and "reckless."[511] While she is successful in stopping criminals and saving Batman's life, Batman assures Robin that it is not because she has skills or is capable. Instead "she has been successful thus far because

---

[511] Edmond Hamilton (w) and Sheldon Moldoff (a) *Detective Comics* Vol. 1 #233 (DC Comics: July 1956) p. 5

of good luck."[512] Like the Batgirls in Gotham, she does carry the 'Bat' moniker. However, Batwoman has brought herself into the crime fighting/super-powered world without permission. Because of this, Kathy is normalized, constrained, and forced to give up her new identity.

During Kathy's first appearance in *Detective Comics* #233, Batman's goal is to stop her from being Batwoman. Essentially to strip her of her powered identity and remove her from the super-powered world. Once depowered, she is expected to accept the identity that has been constrained, created, and expected for her. Batman tells Robin that "I do worry about the risks she's taking," and that they "Have to prove to her she can't keep this up."[513] Without Batman or Robin's permission and approval, Kathy Kane is not permitted to have the Batwoman identity. The expectation is that her identity must be approved by patriarchal permission. Confronted by Batman she willing gives up her autonomy to define herself and her Batwoman identity. Finding her secret hideout, Batman lets Kathy know that she is in mortal danger if she continues being Batwoman. Kathy succumbs to Batman's authority and states, "I guess you're right. I - I'll quite my career as Batwoman."[514] In this panel Kathy is drawn without her mask on as the process of her being stripped of her identity has already begun.[515] Kathy is normalized to the expected position of women in the hierarchy of Gotham. She is dependent on Batman and

---

[512] ibid p. 4

[513] ibid p. 4

[514] ibid p. 12

[515] ibid p. 12

his patriarchy for permission to be reborn into a new identity and enter the superhero world.

Her normalized role and identity is presented as a traditional female role and in line with expected gender performances of the time. As a character created under the Comics Code Authority, she fits into the conservative ideas of gendered identity and performance that the code worked to reenforce. In a later appearance, Robin dreams of a situation where Kathy and Bruce are married. When Kathy tries to take up the identity of Batwoman Batman denies her that identity. "Now look Kathy, one crime fighter in the family is enough! A wife's place is in the home!"[516] Instead of being able to create an identity is relegated to the expected, gendered and identity of the happy housewife. In that story Kathy does go against Batman and societies expectations of her. She puts on the costume and goes off to fight crime. However, her attempt to defy her gendered role of wife goes terribly when her crimefighting skills and lack of subterfuge leads to the criminals winning and Batman's secret identity being revealed. The outcome of Kathy's defiance of patriarchal authority is so drastic and damning that it wakes Robin from his terrible dream. Even with her earlier appearances and depowering, Kathy is one Batwoman character that has constructed an identity free of Batman's control.

Relaunches and retcons provide an opportunity for the logonomic system to reactivate the dominant reading position's control and authority within the field and domain. They also offer openings and breaks in the long running narratives where different reading positions can infiltrate and affect change. When this happens, it creates

---

[516] Bill Finger (w) and Sheldon Moldoff (a) *Batman* Vol 1. #122 (DC Comics: March 1959) p. 24

a fissure within the logonomic system. These fissures are normally corrected by the logonomic system so that it can continue to deliver an expected meaning to the dominant position. However, sometimes these fissures maintain and leave a space for marginalized positions to find their way into the domain and stake claim. With a revised history, origin, and identity the New 52 Kathy Kane marks one of these fissures and a site of conflict between positions.

In Grant Morrison's *Batman Incorporated* #4, Batwoman's first appearance from *Detective Comics* is recreated, but shows Batwoman as smarter and more capable than her 1950s version. Though her reason for creating the Batwoman identity is to attract the attention of Batman, her choice to do so is presented as autonomous and deliberate. She defines the role she will play in Batman's world. "I don't want to feel like mommy at a costume party…I don't want bat-babies, Bruce."[517] The old Kathy was constrained and left with the option of becoming a house wife or mother. The reimagined Kathy is transgressive to those expectations and subverts the gendered performance she should play. She actively rejects the expected identity that has been constructed for her. She is no longer the reckless former crime fighter/house wife, but instead is an effective superhero in her own right. She is shown dominant to Batman and tells him, "I have almost a decade of life experience on you. I'm richer than you, I'm smarter than you."[518] Instead of conforming to the expected identity that has been constructed for her, Kathy Kane is reborn as Headmistress of Spyral. This is an identity that Kathy constructs for herself. In

---

[517] Grant Morrison (w) and Chris Burnham (a) *Batman Incorporated* Vol. 1 #4 (DC Comics: April 2011) p. 15

[518] ibid p. 12

this identity, she leads a spy organization that she claims rules the world,[519] and that Batman did not known existed. Instead of just telling Batman that she is smarter than him, she has proven that she is smarter and more capable than the Dark Knight Detective.

In *Batman Incorporated,* Batman is on the defensive against the machinations of the terrorist organization, Leviathan.[520] When he finally confronts their leader, Talia al Ghul, their fight ends in a stalemate. He is unable to fully overcome her and her forces.[521] Kathy Kan though, has no such problem. She walks into the Batcave unnoticed and neutralize a world criminal. She tells Bruce, "We have been closing in on Talia al Ghul for a long time."(Fig. 71)[522] Batman is the helpmate to this version of Kathy. She is able to defeat the villain where he could not. However, since the end of Morrison's run, Kathy has not shown up again in the pages of DC Comics. As a point of conflict in the domain, it is uncertain if the dominant position will require narratives to once again normalize Kathy back to an acceptable version of the character. In the future Kathy can could be



Fig. 71 Kathy Kane Batwoman and Headmistress of Spiral

---

[519] Grant Morrison (w) and Chris Burnham (a) *Batman Incorporated* Vol. 2 #13 (DC Comics: September 2013) p. 17

[520] Grant Morrison (w) and Chris Burnham and Cameron Stewart (a) *Batman Incorporated: Leviathan Strikes!* #1 (DC Comics: February 2012)

[521] Morrison (w) and Burnham (a) *Batman Incorporated* #13 op cit p. 16

[522] ibid p. 17

depowered or labeled as a fake. The labeling of independent female identities as fake is another way that patriarchal authority can be reasserted. This is the method used to normalize Kathy's Batwoman successor, Kate Kane.

The introduction of Kathy Kane as Batwoman was devised by DC Comics as a response to claims made about Batman's sexuality. To assert that Batman was masculine and heterosexual, Batwoman was introduced to serve as a romantic possibility and foil.[523] This accounts for her becoming Batwoman as an attempt to make Batman fall in love with her. For Kathy's successor, Kate Kane, being a lesbian makes the possibility of being love interest for Batman or any of his Robins unlikely. It is her relationship with a fellow female cadet that leads to her being discharged from West Point military academy over Don't Ask Don't Tell.[524] Aside from the bat moniker, Kate constructs her Batwoman identity completely of her own accord, for her own emotional reasons. Like Kathy, Kate also starts operating in Gotham without Batman's consent. As with the other female crime fighters in Gotham, this lack of permission and approval is a source of dread that the narrative needs to normalize. Instead of having her identity stripped away from her or being forced to stop, Kate's identity is labeled as fake without patriarchal authority bestowing it with realness and permission.

Even though Kate was a military trained soldier at the top of her class, before she can enter the world of Gotham City's crime fighters, she needs to be given permission and her identity needs to be legitimized through patriarchal authority. This permission is

---

[523] Madrid op cit p. 61

[524] Greg Rucka (w) J.H. Williams (a) *Batwoman: Elegy*. (New York: DC Comics, 2010) p. 118

given in the weekly series *52*. Since Batman gone from Gotham Nightwing steps in as the symbol of patriarchal authority. As a male character he is allowed to take Batman's place in Gotham and exercise patriarchal authority.

As a Christmas gift he offers Batwoman a Batarang, a standard piece of equipment for members of the Batfamily. When Kate shows skepticism in the gift Nightwing notes that, "This is a real Batarang."[525] He lauds it's qualities above the inferior, or fake, Batarangs that Kate made and is currently using. "It's not one of those homemade models you've been tossing about."[526] The paradigmatic choice of language used to refer to how Kate has been fighting crime diminishes what she is doing and undermines the legitimacy of her identity. "Tossing about" instead of any other paradigmatic choice denotes infantilization, or childishness. Kate has been playing at her identity. She is performing dress up. According to Nightwing's claims, Kate, her training, skills, crime fighting, and even her identity as Batwoman have been fake and illegitimate. She needs the help and gifts of the patriarchy to become real. This interaction reinforces the idea that male power and approval are required for legitimacy of identity.

By being labeled fake, Batwoman is normalized to the expected patriarchal hierarchy. This normalization even more severe because it comes from Dick Grayson instead of Batman. Like the other male Robin's, Dick has been able to move on from his trauma, obtain power, and create his own identity as Nightwing. The dread of the

---

[525] Geoff Johns, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Mark Waid (w) Keith Giffen, Tom Derenick, Joe Prado (a) *52* #33 (DC Comics: December 20, 2006) p. 3

[526] ibid p. 3

uncontrolled, subversive female identity is absorbed when it is shown that even a male sidekick has the ability to exercise control over female identity.

This reflects a patriarchal idea that no matter how much power or authority a woman may have or obtain, it is inconsequential and less than any form of male power and authority. Without male influence to help define and construct female identity, women would be stuck in a position of powerlessness and only pretending at power. This concept of fake identities is not something that is exclusive to Gotham City or even DC Comics. This method to normalize female identities and exert male control over them is also present in the female heavy X-Men books at Marvel Comics.

Storm: Queen, Goddess, Mutant

Before joining the team of mutants known as the X-Men, Ororo, a.k.a Storm, had constructed an identity for herself and was worshiped as a goddess in matriarchal type system. When first introduced, Storms identity is "Ororo, Great Goddess of the Storm."[527] She resides in a version of Kenya, and lives near a giant stone portal. When drought arrives, the local villagers travel to the portal to pray. "Men come to it in humility, their voices raised in praise and song, and prayerful supplication."[528] With her weather manipulation powers, and a costume, Ororo has created an identity that provides her with autonomy and a position that requires men to offer her sacrifice and supplication. "Ten goats and chickens shall we slay in your honor, if you will only bring us rain!"(Fig. 72)[529] This identity is unique in that Ororo was born into her power and did

---

[527] Len Wein (w) and Dave Cockrum (a). *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (Marvel Comics: May 1975) p. 7

[528] ibid p. 7

[529] ibid p. 7

not receive her power or identity from a major trauma or from already existing male power. Instead she becomes defined by her experiences and autonomy. She is autonomous in her role as a goddess and chooses to deal with the agricultural issues facing her homeland. Ororo's identity is that of a matriarch. The western patriarchal structure of male dominant and female dominated is inverted or at the very least equalized.



Fig. 72 Ororo, Great Goddess of the Storm

How the tribes function outside of their supplication to a goddess is never fully revealed. However, what is known is that Ororo's identity as a storm goddess does not subject itself to patriarchal authority. The men do not come to the portal to insist or command, but to supplicate. At any time Ororo can deny their requests. Her identity and role in a culture that worships women can be seen as a source of transgression and subversion to the western patriarchal ideas of power. Her identity needs to be constrained and patriarchal authority needs to be reasserted. In this instance it patriarchal authority is reasserted through Professor Charles Xavier.

Instead of stripping her of her identity, Professor X presents her with a real identity in comparison to the "fake" identity that she has created for herself. Professor X tells Ororo that her identity, and her perception of herself as a goddess, is not real. The identity that he has constructed for her, however, is. "The world I offer is not beautiful,

but it is real, far more real than the fantasy you're living now."[530] The identity that Ororo has built for herself is a fantasy. Without male control and experience defining it, it cannot be real. "You are no goddess, Ororo. You are a mutant."[531] As the representation of male power, Professor X is able to correctly define her powers and then construct an identity that has been appropriately defined.

The next time that we see Ororo, she has a new name, costume, and identity that have been constructed for her by Professor X.[532] Professor X has overseen and facilitated Ororos ex-utero procreation. Her rebirth into a "real" identity as Storm is one that places her in the proper order of patriarchal authority where she is subject to both Professor X. Her new identity moves her from a position of dominant to a position of dominated.

Like Kate Kane, power and identity is shown as only definable by male experience. Kate does not have real Batarangs so she cannot be a real Batwoman. She needs Nightwing to explain and define what is real to her. Ororo's devine powers and her identity as a goddess is fake, but her identity as the mutant Storm with weather powers is real. Even when Storm becomes a leader of the X-Men, who she is is defined by the patriarchal authority that Professor X represents. Ororo's titles and identity can be changed, given, and taken away at the whims of the patriarchy. Her publication history is full of moments of rebirth and continuity corrections to constrain her to a more normalized performance. Storm's normalized gender performance that is connected to the matriarchal role that she had as Ororo.

---

[530] ibid p. 9

[531] ibid p. 9

[532] ibid. 14

In the winter of 2005, Marvel Comics announced that Storm and their first black superhero Black Panther would be getting married in upcoming issues of *Black Panther*.[533] In preparation for this event, a six issue limited series was published focussing on Storm and her first meeting with King T'Challa, the Black Panther. Though this first meeting had already been touched on in earlier comics, media outlets and fans were told that this story was "for all intents and purposes…Ororo's origin story," and that "This is big, big, changes for Storm"[534].

These changes expanded the history and backstory of Ororo before she became a goddess and was found by Professor X and constrain her origin and identity. This retcon changed the context of Ororo's identity to make her seem more submissive in relation to her soon to be husband. Where parts of a shared past between the two characters had been touched on briefly, they were expanded in the new mini series. Aspects of how the two met and how their young relationship ended were retconned and changed to bring the dynamic of Ororo and T'Challa's relationship more in line with expected gender performance. The new miniseries opened up a piece of continuity and allowed the logonomic system to reframe and further constrain Storm and her identity. This reactivates the dominant position's authority and expectations as a defining aspect of the character.

In their original meeting as told in *Marvel Team-Up* #100, a twelve year old Ororo comes to the rescue of a young T'Challa who is about to be beat by a white racist named

---

[533] Axel Alonso "Black Panther/Storm Wedding Press Conference" (newsarama.com. 23 Nov. 2005) < http://www.newsarama.com/marvelnew/Panther/wedding/press.htm>

[534] ibid.

Andreas de Ruyter.[535] "That boy needs help, and I'm going to give it to him!" Storm declares as she flies to the rescue. In the retconned version of the story, it is T'Challa who rescues a young Storm from de Ruyter.[536] This version of Storm is powerless and still developing her mutant abilities. The Storm that saved T'Challa destroys guns with lightning.[537] This retelling signifies paradigmatic shift in meaning for that first meeting. In the original version, Ororo is presented as the more confident and capable of the pair. Her time living as an orphan in Kenya has prepared her in ways that T'Challa's life as a prince in Wakanda have not. The choice to switch these rolls serves to make T'Challa more powerful and dominant in the narrative. Where Ororo was the active character in *Marvel Team-Up*, she is passive in the mini series. She is unconscious when the villains are defeated. The final image of that issue is T'Challa holding her protectively and defiant against new danger.[538]

The paradigmatic shift sets up a familiar set of constraints and expectations when placed in context of the upcoming marriage. In most narratives, the prince saves the princess[539] from danger. Saving the damsel in distress is how the prince obtains his wife, queen, and the mother of his children. Leading up to his proposal and eventual marriage, it is reiterated that T'Challa needs to find a wife and have children. "His next job was to

---

[535] Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (a)(w) "Cry…Vengance!" *Marvel Team-Up* Vol. 1 #100 (Marvel Comics: December 1980) p. 27

[536] Eric Jerome Dicky (w) and David Yardin (a) *Storm* Vol. 2 #2 (Marvel Comics: May 2006) pp. 21-23

[537] Claremont (w) and Byrne (a)(w) *Marvel Team-Up* #100 op cit. p. 27

[538] ibid p. 25

[539] Another major revelation in the series is that Storm is literally a princess.

find a wife and produce an heir or two."[540] T'Challa is also told that "Primary among your duties as king is to select a mate for yourself…to protect the royal bloodline."[541] In the king/queen dynamic that Black Panther and Storm represent, Black Panther represents the dominant, ruling, warrior father, while Storm is the passive, rescued, pregnant mother.

In restructuring and normalizing their identities, Storm is told that one of the reasons she would make a good wife for T.Challa is "It takes a strong woman to lead and breed these strong men."[542] To be a mother and raise children is in no way a problematic representation. However, Storm and her identity is constrained and limited to that one inevitability. T'Challa is the strong man meant to rule and protect, while Ororo is the nurturing female meant to breed more men like T'Challa.



Fig. 73 The gendered representation of Black Panther and Storm

Storm is constrained to only two possibles: the mother or the whore, the monster or the angel. Until she is the mother, she can be ogled, seen, and objectified. The cover of *Black Panther* #15 highlights how the male/female, king/queen dynamic should be seen and understood.(Fig. 73)[543] Black Panther is presented strong and muscled in his iconic costume. His identity as a protective king and

---

[540] Reginald Hudlin (w) and Scott Eaton (a) *Black Panther* Vol. 4 #10 (Marvel Comics: January 2006) p. 10

[541] ibid p. 11

[542] Reginald Hudlin (w) and Scott Eaton (a) *Black Panther* Vol. 4 #15 (Marvel Comics: June 2006) p. 20

[543] ibid Cover

warrior is iconically constructed. Storm is objectified. Her body, breasts, and the primal markers of her femaleness are on display. The two are meant to present and perform their gendered roles.

By shifting the nature of the two's first meeting expectations are met and gendered performances are reaffirmed. Ororo is no longer stronger or more powerful than T'Challa. This retcon constrains her gender, identity, and power. Her powers are presented as uncontrolled in comparison to T'Challa's honed warrior skills. T'Challa has an identity as a prince and the heir of the Black Panther legacy. Ororo and her future identities as the X-Man Storm, and eventually the Queen of Wakanda, has no identity and is dependent on T'Challa and Professor X to shape who she will be.

Once it was announced that Storm would become Black Panther's wife, her character needed to be constrained to fit the chaste, maternal, princess in waiting. In the issues leading up to the wedding, the narrative takes moments to insure that Storms chaste status is clear. Talking about his plan to propose with fellow Avenger, Luke Cage, Black Panther asks, "You hit on her and she turned you down, right?"[544] Luke Cage confirms this, assuring Black Panther that Storm has had suitors, but turned them down.

Storms chaste status and sexual history comes up again in discussion between Cage and Wolverine, Storm's long-time teammate. Wolverine informs Cage that his relationship to Storm was sexless and chase despite appearances. "I never, as you say, 'hit it'. *Wanted* to, but who didn't? Present company included."[545] Again, Cage confirms that

---

[544] Reginald Hudlin (w) and Scott Eaton (a) *Black Panther* Vol. 4 #14 (Marvel Comics: May 2006) p. 5

[545] Reginald Hudlin (w) and Scott Eaton (a) *Black Panther* Vol. 4 #17 (Marvel Comics: August 2006) p. 5

he flirt with her and wanted to sleep with her, or "hit it." Not only does this exchange confirm that Storm is the object of desire for many men - something that is reiterated with her objectified representations on covers and in the actual issues - but has rejected them. It makes explicit that assumptions about having had sex with these suitors and teammates never occurred. She can enter into her marriage faithful to Black Panther.

With all of the retcons and surprises that are revealed about Storm in the lead up to her marriage, her sexual history is the most interesting. While the *Black Panther* series implies that she has not had sex with any other men,[546] the mini series replaces an ambiguous physical relationship between a young Ororo and T'Challa with a confirmation of a sexual relationship.[547] While this means that Storm does not come to the marriage virginal, it shifts her sexuality and identity to appear as though she has only ever been sexually available to T'Challa. At a young age he claimed her and is now coming back for what is rightfully his.

While Black Panther's identity as powerful and active is maintained, Storms identity is altered and retconned to constrain her identity. Storm must be constrained so that her identity and sexual history are subject to Black Panther's authority and power. Even after their marriage is annulled, Black Panther tries to exert his authority over Storm's identity and sexuality. He asks if she is dating anyone by saying, "I wish you well in your new endeavors, wherever and with whomever they may take you. Just

---

[546] Though her relationship with Native American X-Man Forge is touched on briefly, it is never really clear how physical their relationship got, just that he rejected her and that it was emotionally destructive for her.

[547] Eric Jerome Dicky (w) and David Yardin (a) *Storm* Vol. 2 #4 (Marvel Comics: July 2006) pp. 20, 23

promise me one thing…Not him. Not him."[548] The "him" in this case is fellow X-Man Wolverine. Even though she is no longer Black Panther's wife, there is still the expectation that patriarchal authority can dictate who Storm is and the sexual choices she makes.

Since her identities are constructed by patriarchal power, Storm is subject to the whims of that same power. As a member of the X-Men she eventually leads her own team, but she is still subject to the authority of male leaders. Professor X is able to exert authority over her and she is subject to oversight from Professor X's second in command, Cyclops. The dynamic constructed in the X-Men comics is that Storm is a team leader, but her actions are governed by male authority.[549] While she is considered a leader, that leadership can be removed, minimized, and constrained. Defying the patriarchal leadership is to be subversive or duplicitous. When Storm clashes with the authority of male leadership she is reprimanded or normalized.[550] These narrative moments signal that as prominent as Storm is - or any female character for that matter - they have been constrained and need to be submissive to patriarchal authority.

While married to Black Panther, Storm is referred to textually as his equal and that the two are equal partners.[551] While this may be the case, the narrative transmits a message shows that Storm's identity as wife and queen is not an identity that is equally

---

[548] Jason Aaron (w) and David Lopez (a) *Wolverine and the X-Men* Vol. 1 #24 (Marvel Comics: March 2013) p. 2

[549] Brian Wood (w) and David Lopez (a) *X-Men* Vol. 3 #32 (Marvel Comics: September 2012) p. 5

[550] John Byrne (w) and Whilce Portacio (w)(a) *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #282 (Marvel Comics: November 1991) p. 6

[551] Reginald Hudlan (w) and Manuel Garcia (a) *Black Panther* Vol. 4 #21 (Marvel Comics: December 2006) p. 17

constructed. Like her identity and role as a leader of the X-Men, her identity as a queen can be constrained and disassembled if her choices are subversive or contradictory to power that constructed that identity.

During the *Avengers vs X-Men* event, Storm sides with her fellow mutants. At the same time, her husband sides with his former colleges the Avengers. During the fights and skirmishes between the two teams, the mutant Namor sends a tsunami at Wakanda that floods the country and kills countless citizens.[552] When Storm arrives to help the suffering country and her subjects, Black Panther informs her the Wakandans are no longer her people. "Our marriage was annulled by the high priest of the Panther Clan. You are not my wife anymore."[553] By siding opposite her husband and submitting to his authority, she has her status and identity stripped away. To express the dominant nature of patriarchy though, Storm notes that, "The high priest of the Panther Clan? But, *you* are the high priest."[554] Since her identity as the queen of Wakanda was constructed through marriage to Black Panther, that identity is dependent on him and his authority.

Storm's identity is translated and reshaped through Black Panther's experiences. To oppose him is to oppose the patriarchal power structure. Storm faces the fate of all the other female characters that are shown subverting or defying patriarchal authority and has her identity constrained and normalized.

---

[552] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Adam Kubert (a) *Avengers vs. X-Men* #8 (Marvel Comics: September, 2012) pp. 1,2,4

[553] Jason Aaron (w) and Adam Kubert (a) *Avengers vs. X-Men* #9 (Marvel Comics: October, 2012) p. 9

[554] ibid p. 9

A footnote to the massively hyped and annulled marriage of Storm/Black Panther is a moment of subversion and the reclaiming of identity. After the admonition of Black Panther to Storm about who she can have a relationship with, Storm actively takes control of reconstructing an identity for herself. With Wolverine's help she cuts her hair into a mohawk that is similar in style to her more androgynous look from the 80s. She gives herself the title of "Headmistress Ororo" at the Jean Grey School and finishes her rebirth by defying Black Panther and kissing Wolverine.(Fig. 74)[555] This identity is shown based on Ororo's choices and autonomy. It is subversive to the already constituted desires of patriarchal authority. She constructs a new costume and body exercises power through sexual agency. However, for this identity to maintain would be a cause of friction and dread for the dominant reading position. Like with the identity constructed for Kathy Kane, it is uncertain if the logonomic system will correct and retcon away Ororo's new identity and close the fissure that it has created. In any future issues, patriarchal authority is capable of reasserting itself and absorbing the dread of the subversive female identity.



Fig. 74 Storm and Wolverine kiss in defiance of Black Panthers request

Female identity is most often shown dependent on patriarchal power. The dominant reading position is assured that female identity and the way women see their

---

[555] Aaron (w) and Lopez (a) *Wolverine and the X-Men* #24 op cit pp. 17-18

own identities are constrained by, and perceived through, the lens of male experience. The idea of real verses fake as a narrative tool to normalize female identity is necessary for characters such as Ororo and Kate since their powers and their costumes are constructed without patriarchal authority. For other female characters, the acquisition of powers and costumes being dependent on patriarchal influence is another way that their identities are dependent on patriarchal experience and identity.

This male-centric origin for female characters is how any agency and choice in the creation of their identity is constrained. Like female characters who have had their self created identities erased from continuity or constrained by male authority, female origins that are focused on female experience are often retconned away. This makes them more male centric and assuages the potential fear or dread the audience may have of a women that is not dependent on men to define themselves.

Say Hello to Your New Improved Harley Quinn

At its core, the creation of female identity is about agency and autonomy. Are her powers dependent on male experience? Is she passive in receiving power? Like She-Hulk, receiving power is left up to male characters to decide or to dictate. Once they have received those powers, they do not have the autonomy to use those powers and the use of power is constrained by male experience. The expectation of the female gendered body and the female costume also constrains autonomy. If a female character does not present or perform hyper feminine, or hyper sexual, the logonomic system works to make the body and costume meet constrained. And finally, when adopting a new identity, male authority is constantly present to constrain and define the new identity. In relation to

power, the costume, identity, or all three, patriarchal authority is constantly present in female character's existence, experience, and development. It works to dictate and constrain the character's possibles while reassuring the dominant position that their expectations, desires, and pleasure is being met.

For male characters, the choice of how to use their powers, to wear a costume, and to take on the superhero identity is a choice they have. For female characters, this agency and autonomy is taken away and left to male influence. Even if Barbara made the choice to become Batgirl, she would not be free to act on that choice without Batman. Jennifer is unconscious and unable to make any sort of choice about gaining power, or how she will use it. Patriarchal influence in the important aspects of superhero identity is primarily about limiting female agency and choice. When retcons and reboots happen, it is a moment where the dominant position can be reactivated and reassert its dominance within the field. This means limiting choice and agency for female characters or refocusing their origins and experiences through a male-centric lens. As the dominant position in a field or domain fights to reassert it's dominance and gain more control, that position is in constant conflict with new positions vying for space and voice within that domain. When these new positions start to become too influential, the logonomic system works to push them out. It reactivates the dominant position and normalize meaning and constrains possible readings of the text.

No matter how well the logonomic system may function, sites of friction between positions still show up. In comics, this friction can be seen in the way different creative teams deal with a character across multiple titles. Because a character like Wonder

Woman can appear monthly in an issue of *Justice League*, her own *Wonder Woman* title, *Superman/Wonder Woman,* or an issue of *Secret Six*, there is the potential for all of those appearances and representations to contradict each other and provide different readings for different positions. While Marvel and DC work to make sure there is cohesion and braiding across all of their titles, the reader can still see moments of conflict to define the canonical representation of the character. Harley Quinn is one character that has been a point of friction between different positions in the comics field. There have been multiple attempts to constrain her powers, body, and identity to an expected and normalized representation, though not without resistance. Old and new creators have actively tried to define the character to meet the expectations of particular reading positions.

Harley Quinn is unique for a female character within superhero comics. She is responsible for her ex-utero rebirth from Dr. Harleen Quinzel to Harley Quinn. She makes the decision to break into a costume shop and steal her first costume.[556] In superhero comics, the putting on of a costume becomes a metaphor for taking on power and a new identity. Unlike the female characters we have looked at so far, who are costumed or powered through male oversight, Harley is responsible for constructing her own identity. Poison Ivy only receives power after she is experimented on and injected with poisons and toxins by her lover. Misty Knight is given her bionic arm by Tony Stark. Even the super spy Black Widow is chosen and trained by the exclusively male Russian KGB. Where male characters are given choice and space to create their identities, female

---

[556] Paul Dini (w) Bruce W. Timm (a). *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. (New York: DC Comics, 1994) p. 33

characters are beholden to male choice and experience to define the spaces they inhabit. Harley, however, defies this stereotype.

When Batman recounts Harley's origin, he mentions that "as a teenager, she won a gymnastic scholarship to Gotham State University."[557] The onus of her skills and abilities is attributed to her. She is the person that won the scholarship. Whoever trained her or awarded the scholarship is absent from the narrative, making those skills and abilities exclusively Harley's. When Harley is eventually given heightened abilities, it is through Poison Ivy and female power.[558] With her abilities and her decision to put on a costume, Harley is the primary source of her identity. Most writers have tried to maintain the idea that Harley has chosen power and it was her agency that got her to where she is. In one retelling of her life Harley tells the reader that "I was the only one in my family to graduate from college, let alone get a masters and then doctorate. Criminal psychology. I was intent on fixing things."[559] Harley is presented as both physically and mentally gifted. One panel of this page is occupied by an image of an academic letter of recommendation. The letter is from"The Dean" and highlights how intelligent and capable Harley is. The cannon and doxa that have defined Harley over the years is laced with her agency, ability to choose, and a skilled and intelligent identity.

Her choice in becoming Harley Quinn is in pursuit of her desire for The Joker, but even that aspect of her agency can be seen as subversive to the expected gender norms. As Naomi Wolf points out, to be considered sexually normalized, a woman "must not

---

[557] ibid p. 10

[558] Paul Dini (w) and Yvel Guichet (a) *Batman: Harley Quinn* (New York: DC Comics, 1999) p. 25-27

[559] Matt Kindt (w) and Niel Googe (a). *Detective Comics* Vol 2. #23.2 (DC Comics: November 2013) p. 3

seek and initiate, but wait and yield."[560] In her relationship with The Joker, Harley never waits and yields. She seeks out Arkham Asylum and initiates contact and a relationship with The Joker.(Fig. 75)[561] Harley's ability to choose makes her a more active character, though this also puts her in opposition to the expectations of the dominant reading position.


Fig. 75 Original Harley Quinn design

While her relationship with The Joker is less than ideal, when she is presented with the choice of what is good for her and what feels good, human foibles lead her to choose the later. Good or not, it is still a choice that she is allowed to make. She chooses the relationship she will be in and her identity in that relationship. Unfortunately, allowing Harley this level of agency in her identity subverts the expectations of the dominant position and makes her a source of dread. To normalize Harley, the New 52 reboot fashions a new costume and body for her.(Fig. 76)[562] The reboot also altered the narrative surrounding how she became powered and her rebirth. These changes constrained Harley into a preferred performance that privileges a dominate male position of control and experience. Instead of being the sole source of


Fig. 76 New 52 Harley Quinn

---

[560] Naomi Wolf. *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood*. (New York: Random House, 1997) p. 39

[561] Dini (w) and Timm (a) op cit pp. 22-5

[562] Glass (w) and Dalacchio (w) op cit Cover

her new appearance and powers, her origin is altered to make her identity as Harley Quinn predicated on the existence of male characters. Like with so many other female characters, it is assumed that understanding female experience and identity can only be achieved if it is framed within male experience.

In her New 52 origin, primary aspects of Harley's remain in tact. She is still a doctor at Arkham Asylum, she still falls in love with The Joker, and she still helps to break him out. However, in her relationship with The Joker she is normalized sexually and the agency she had in the creation of her new identity is constrained by patriarchal authority. Instead of initiating her relationship with The Joker she becomes passive. In becoming Harley Quinn, she yields to The Joker's experiences and her choice in her rebirth is explicitly ignored and discarded. Even her individualized powers of being intelligent are lessened through her interactions with The Joker.

When Harley is given the opportunity to finally work with The Joker, he is the one that pursues and initiates a relationship with her. "Oh, I like this one,"[563] he declares during their first meeting. Harley though sees their first meeting as "not exactly fireworks."[564] Harley is normalized sexually by becoming passive and having The Joker pursue her. He is the one that controls the dynamics of their relationship while she yields to his plans for the two of them. During The Joker's therapy sessions, Harley is presented as mentally inferior to him. The Joker always has the upper hand and is shown as the one analyzing her instead of the other way around.[565]

---

[563] Adam Glass (w) Clayton Henry (a). *Suicide Squad* Vol. 4 #6 (DC Comics, April 2012) p. 9

[564] ibid p. 10

[565] ibid pp. 16-18

This dominance of the male position is similar to the reimagining of Storm and Black Panther's relationship. Because it is expected for the male position to be dominant and dictate the nature of a relationship, the female position must be submissive in relation to male experience and authority. Becoming a villain and helping The Joker escape is no longer Harley's choice, but something The Joker coerces her into doing. The Joker tells Harley that "I use to be the same way. Powerless."[566] He points out that in her identity as Dr. Quenzel, Harley has no power, and that his life as a costumed villain is one of power. For the powerless Harley though, he "can show [her] how."[567] The Joker becomes the instructor and source of power for Harley. Instead of her being able to find power and construct her identity herself, she is only allowed access to that power through the patriarchal system. Only because The Joker is willing to help her, is Harley allowed entrance into the powered world.

After helping The Joker break out of the asylum, Harley is given a choice in the final phase of her rebirth. Standing on a catwalk in a chemical factory, Harley begins to question her actions. At this point, Harley makes a choice for her future, "I want to go home."[568] The autonomous version of Harley could have chosen to go home. However, in normalizing her and making her more submissive, her choice is negated by patriarchal authority. Her choice to receive power, get a new costume and body, and be reborn into a new identity is limited. Her choice is to go home, but that choice is ignored.

---

[566] ibid p. 17

[567] ibid p. 18

[568] Adam Glass (w) and Clayton Henry (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 4 #7 (DC Comics: May 2012) p. 12

As the dominant member of their relationship, The Joker throws Harley into a vat of chemicals where she is transformed into Harley Quinn.[569] The autonomy that could be read into Harley's origin is negated when her transformation becomes subjected to male experience and choice. Even in her first incarnation Harley was given the chance to name herself and to construct her identity. In *Mad Love*, when she tries to free The Joker from Arkham Assylum, she introduces herself by saying "say hello to your new improved Harley Quinn."[570] She is in a costume of her own make and design and created a new identity for herself. When her agency has been limited and given to The Joker, she emerges from the tank of chemicals literally stripped down to an identity he dictated.

Her clothes have been burned away leaving only her new pale skin and glimpses of her underwear.(Fig. 77)[571] Her body has been reconstructed and the clothes that marked her as a doctor - like Sara Pezzini's detective clothing when she uses the Witchblade - has been stripped and shredded away. The process of her transformation in the New 52 retcon is a gradual process of stripping her down. Where her *Mad Love* origin was a building up and constructing of a unique and individual identity, New 52 Harley is pulled apart and left near naked in a new body. The visual representation of Harley, how her identity becomes iconic to the reader, is meant to make her more sexual and her body more of



Fig. 77 Harley Quinn stripped and bleached

[569] ibid p. 13

[570] Dini (w) and Timm (a) *Mad Love* op cit p. 34

[571] Glass (w) and Henry (a) *Suicide Squad* #7 op cit p. 13

the focus.

In both of her origins, Dr. Quinzel has her identity as an intelligent and educated doctor visually reinforced with her long white coat, buttoned up shirt, tie, hair pulled up, and wearing glasses. Her rebirth in *Mad Love* is quick. Dr. Quinzel decides to put on a costume and then appears to the reader as Harley Quinn.[572] In her retconned origin she progresses slowly towards becoming Harley Quinn. She figuratively, and literally, strips away her Dr. Quinzel identity. From panel to panel, Dr. Quinzel's buttoned up shirt becomes more unbuttoned - eventually revealing part of her bra - her hair starts to come undone, and the slit in her skirt reveals more leg.

The visual stripping reinforces the constrained roles that are available for female characters. Harley Quinn, like so many of the other female characters examined in this thesis, have their identities first and foremost defined by their gender and by the visual markers of that femaleness. Her body and costume shape a more objectified identity. To construct her new identity, Harley's body must be revealed and exposed. While her original costume may mirror certain aspects of The Joker's, it still represented agency and an identity that was uniquely hers. Her New 52 costume and identity is dependent on The Joker. The removal of the last shreds of her old clothing are because of his actions. Her rebirth into Harley Quinn is framed by his own rebirth and experience.

Pulling Dr. Quenzel out of the vat of chemicals, The Joker calls her Harley.[573] The Joker becomes the source of her name the same way he has been the creator of her new

---

[572] Dini (w) and Timm (a) *Mad Love* op cit p. 34, Dini (w) and Guichet (a) *Batman: Harley Quinn* op cit p. 8

[573] Glass (w) and Henry (a) op cit #7 p. 15

body. Even the space of transformation is structured by The Joker's experiences. When he takes her to the chemical factory, The Joker points out that "This is a special place for me. It's where I was born."[574] Harley's rebirth is required to mimic The Joker's own rebirth. He is the point of origin and the dominant experience that overshadows Harley Quinn's rebirth. Instead of coming into her own in a unique or individualized way, she mirrors The Joker's experience. This supplants the female experience of self discovery with the privileged male experience.

By retconning Harley's origin, the character looses a level of depth and individuality. Because her rebirth is controlled and dictated by The Joker and his experiences, he becomes the creator of Harley Quinn. The Joker explicitly tells Harley that she is "what I made you."[575] He even goes so far as to show Harley a room filled with skeletons wearing costumes similar to Harley's. The Joker tells her, "Other Harleys! What? you thought you were the first one?! I can tell you this. you won't even be the last."[576] Harley no longer possesses a unique identity. Narratively, Harley is just one of The Jokers "toys."[577] She can be taken apart, reconstructed, and rebuilt. Anything that was unique or extraordinary about her is reduced down to extensions of The Joker's narrative and experience.

It is assumed that to understand and identify with a character's origin, rebirth, and identity, that origin needs to be presented in a context that in some way overlaps with the

---

[574] ibid p. 14

[575] Adam Glass (w) and Fernando Dagnino (a) *Suicide Squad* Vol. 4 #15 (DC Comics: February 2013) p. 13

[576]ibid p. 16

[577] ibid p. 15

audience's own experience. By framing Harley's female experience within a male experience, it allows the dominant reading position to identify and see Harley's experience as similar to, but less than, a male experience. This reasserts the primacy of the male centric aspects of the dominant position. It also limits the possibilities of other positions. It Removes the possibility for other gendered positions to connect with and see representations of themselves and their experiences within Harley. From her inception and introduction into the Batman universe, Harley can be seen as a fissure within the logonomic system. Her origin, power, costume, and identity were not delivering enough of the expected and desired meaning to the dominant reading position. To close the fissure, she was retconned and redesigned to place her back into an expected and submissive gendered performance. The logoonomic system is then able to deliver the expected meaning to the perceived dominant position.

Looking back at our examination of the Bechdale test, one of the potential reasons for Harley's popularity among a female readership is the fact that her origin gave her a space to become self aware and to grow outside of the control of patriarchal influence and male experience. By taking her key transitional moment and putting it under male control closes off that space and limits the possibilities for a female readership to decode their own experiences from it. However, like with Wonder Woman, Harley is a character and space where positions within the comics field are in conflict. Like Wonder Woman, Harley was created outside of the logonomic system at work in the comics field. Where Wonder Woman was made specifically to appeal to a female readership and to oppose

patriarchal power structures, Harley was made to appeal to an audience outside of the perceived dominant reading position of comics.

Harley's first appearance was as a villain in the after school *Batman: The Animated Series*. The cartoon introduced Harley Quinn and Detective Montoya, two female characters that quickly transitioned from the cartoon into the comics. Harley's first comic appearance in *Mad Love* is essentially a few episodes of the cartoon adapted into a large format comic. Because of this, the construction of her identity, the source of her powers, and her costumed appearance are absent many of the requirements that are expected and transmitted by the logonomic system in comics. However, since her introduction into the comics she has undergone a number of attempts to place her within the expected rules of superhero comics. Her New 52 reboot is the most visible and extreme attempt at normalization. Even that change, though, has not held. Her current solo title is removed from many of the expected superhero tropes and cliches. The new series - which has been outperforming almost every other book at the publisher[578] - is more of a madcap caper book than a superhero book.

Harley still wears a version of her new costume, but is most often seen wearing everyday clothes and fashion with a slightly Harley twist. The title is aware of the tropes that could be expected of the book and openly mocks them or plays with the concept. In one story arc Power Girl shows up and the narrative actively mocks the concept of her costume and her exposed breasts. It also plays up the fact that Harley, in comparison, "is

---

[578] David Carter "DC Comics Month-to-Month Sales: The Divergent Series" *The Beat.* (13 Aug. 2015) <http://www.comicsbeat.com/dc-comics-month-to-month-sales-june-2015-the-divergent-series/>

flat as a surfboard."[579] The new narrative understands the tropes and expectations of the dominant position, and then actively mocks those expectations as cartoonish and ridiculous. The Joker is not part of the series and Harley's sexuality is centered in female experience.

Harley is sexually aggressive, regardless of the individual being male or female. It has been hinted at covertly, and overtly, that Harley and Poison Ivy have a sexual relationship. Recently, the creators behind the book have stated emphatically that the two characters are in an open, polyamorous-type relationship.[580] This version of Harley is written and drawn with more autonomy and agency. She is able to choose and reject sexual partners, sees patients as a psychologist, and spends her evenings as part of a roller derby team. The men who show up in the book are often ineffectual, passive, and in need of Harley's help. They are also often objectified, inverting the way the female characters have been objectified in other superhero titles. The book itself is a space where female characters have a voice and existence absent of male interference. When male influence does enter the text, it is subverted and rendered impotent within the female dominated space.

However, even as the monthly *Harley Quinn* title works to subvert patriarchal expectations and power structures, Harley is also appearing monthly in the *New Suicide Squad* title. In that title, along with the new Amanda Waller, Harley's personality and appearance are completely different than the version in her own title. The *New Suicide*

---

[579] Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti (w) and Chad Hardin (a) *Harley Quinn* Vol. 2 #11 (DC Comics: December 2014) p. 10

[580] Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti interviewed by the author (23 Nov. 2014)

Squad Harley is in her hyper sexualized costume, is passive, needs to be saved, and is controlled by her male teammates. She is presented as a reflection of female stereotypes. She spends the majority of one issue in a catfight with another female character over whom The Joker prefers.[581]

If sales are the ultimate indicator of which of Harley's two identities will survive, data shows that *Harley Quinn* outsells *New Suicide Squad* two to one.[582] However, the version that will be canonized and remembered is still to be determined. No matter how successful a creative team or title may be, they may decide to move on, or another major reboot may happen that causes all the history of *Harley Quinn* to be wiped away. The team that steps in after Amanda Conner and her husband Jimmy Palmiotti may decide to deliver a title that is more constrained to the expectations of the dominant position. In the near future, Harley could be normalized back to the expected role of sexual object or mother, the two default possibles for female identity.

Mad Woman in Genosha

In examining the idea of identity, and the identities of female characters in superhero comics, it is important to look at the root of those identities. Beyond just new names and titles, there are the types of identities that female characters have been constrained to. I have alluded to these types throughout this thesis. The Madonna/Whore or Angel/Monster are at the core of female identity in not only superhero comics, but in much of film and literature for centuries. In their seminal text, *The Madwoman in the*

---

[581] Sean Ryan (w) and Tom Derenick and Jeremy Roberts (a) *New Suicide Squad* #3 (DC Comics: December 2014) pp. 8-14

[582] Carter op cit.

Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that female characters have traditionally fallen into this binary and that readers and writers have come to understand and create female characters based on the extremes of these dichotomies. In superhero comics, the presumed dominant reading position is "identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented."[583] The dominant position has come to expect the angelic or monstrous woman. This is not because women in the real world could actually fit into such simple binaries, but because to the dominant position, that is the way it has always been. The angelic woman is submissive, silent, and controlled. She strives for domesticity. The role of the mother and the wife are the only possibles available to her. To defy any of these assertions or requirements, marks the woman as monstrous, evil, and frightening. Where the angelic woman should be lauded, praised, and emulated, the monster woman is reviled, hated, and punished for her subversive and transgressive self.

In the superhero narrative, we have already seen how unchecked power and sexuality can create monstrous women like Dark Phoenix or how a body or costume that does not conform to standards of beauty and submissiveness can lead to transgressive characters needing to be normalized. To highlight the dangers of transgressive and subversive women, truly monstrous, horrifying, and dangerous women arise in male-dominated texts. These female characters become the embodiment of male dread of women. These female characters are all the more dreadful and dangerous because they have hidden behind an angelic identity, only to be revealed as a monster woman. "The

---

[583] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale, 1984) p. 17

monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside with (or in the lower half of) the angel."[584] Not only does gender need to be constantly transmitted, the dominant position needs to be reassured which side of the Angel/Monster dichotomy the character resides on.

To be hidden or secret, interferes with and fractures the systems of power and control that the patriarchal structures have come to rely on and expect. To have a female character be non-gender specific or a concealed monster upsets the power relations between the genders. The type of female characters that would oppose and subvert expectations are seen as out of control and outside of the influence and dictates of patriarchal authority. When these monstrous women arise, they become metaphors for the dangers of women not constrained or controlled. The damage they can cause and the danger they represent must eventually be controlled by the narrative.

These truly monstrous women tend to take on very specific forms. They become "Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts."[585] Gilbert and Gubar's description of the monster woman fits Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a Scarlet Witch, perfectly. It is almost as though the creative teams behind the events, *Avengers Disassembled* and *House of M*, were using it as a template for how the character would be written and presented.

---

[584] ibid p. 76

[585] ibid p. 29

In 2004, *Avengers Disassembled* revealed former teammate and hero Scarlet Witch as a villain. Driven mad by her unchecked powers and inability to have children, she kills three of her teammates and then rips apart and reshapes the world in *House of M* all before committing a mutant genocide. Using her canonical history as pretext, the creative team fashioned Scarlet Witch into a literal madwoman in the attic. She is dangerous, insane, unstable, and powerful. Like Dark Phoenix before her, death or depowering was presented as the only options to control her. Scarlet Witch's only escape from her failings as an angelic woman is her madness, a madness that has the potential to alter reality and give everyone what they want. Even in her madness, she is seen as too dangerous and too out of control to be constrained.

Wanda and her twin brother Pietro first appeared in *X-Men* #4 as members of Magneto's Brotherhood of Evil Mutants.[586] As Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver, the two siblings made a handful of appearances as villains before reforming and joining the Avengers.[587] During her time as an Avenger, Wanda met, fell in love with, and eventually married her android teammate, The Vision.[588] Wanda conformed perfectly to the angel identity. After becoming a hero with the Avengers, she sought out a life of domesticity. Her and The Vision eventually have children. Though because Vision is an android, Wanda became pregnant using magic.[589] Unfortunately, because her children are unnatural, magical constructs, it is revealed that they are shards of the demon Mephisto's

---

[586] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a) *X-Men* Vol. 1 #4 (Marvel Comics: March 1964)

[587] Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #16 (Marvel Comics: May 1965)

[588] Steve Englehart (w) and Don Heck (a) *Giant-Size Avengers* Vol. 1 #4 (Marvel Comics: June 1975)

[589] Steve Englehart (w) and Richard Howell (a) "Ancestors" *Vision and the Scarlet Witch* Vol. 2 #3 (Marvel Comics: December 1985)

soul and are absorbed by the demon.[590] To protect Wanda's motherly constitution, the memory of her children is erased from her mind.[591]

When *Avengers: Disassembled*[592] opens, it is just any other day for the Avengers at Avengers mansion. However, the easy going and relaxed vibe is quickly disrupted. Readers are informed that the day that unfolds here "is the worst day in Avengers history."[593] By the end of the first issue, Scott Lang, Ant-Man, has been incinerated[594] and The Vision has been killed and ripped apart.[595] While the attacks against the heroes seem to be an unending wave of enemy after enemy, the real mastermind and orchestrator of death and destruction is unknown. As The Vision points out before he releases a number of killer robots on the team "It is not I who brings this plague upon you."[596] Earths mightiest heroes are subject to a plague, an unrelenting infection that threatens to kill them all and rip the team apart. While the Avengers have faced many opponents, this one is presented as the worst and most dangerous villain they have faced. This villain threatens to destroy "Anything that we, as a group, held dear."[597] Even with all of the death that has already happened, there is still plenty to come. On the cover of part 3,

---

[590] John Byrne (w)(a) *Avengers: West Coast* #51,#52 (Marvel Comics: November-December 1989)

[591] ibid

[592] A play on the rallying cry, "Avengers Assemble" that Captain America yells when forming up the team.

[593] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and David Finch (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #501 (Marvel Comics: October 2004) p. 1

[594] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and David Finch (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #500 (Marvel Comics: September 2004) p. 8

[595] ibid pp. 33-34

[596] ibid p. 21

[597] ibid p. 21



Fig. 78 Which Avenger will die?

Hawkeye, Hank Pim, Wasp, and Scarlet Witch stand above bold letters that declare, "One of these avengers will die!"(Fig. 78)[598] True to the proclamation, Hawkeye is dead by the end of the issue.

It is not until the fourth and final part that the orchestrator of the disassemble is revealed. Sensing magical manipulation, Dr. Strange arrives to warn the Avengers that Scarlet Witch is their opponent. The angelic woman that they have all trusted and cared about is actually a monster that has betrayed them. A number of Avengers refuse to believe Strange's claim: "No, she's a good person. She's our friend."[599] For the Avengers, they only see the angelic woman that Wanda was, not the monster that she actually is. It takes Dr. Strange to point out the deception. In describing the monstrous nature of Wanda, he goes through Gilbert and Gubar's description of the monster woman almost point by point.

"As a mutant, she was born with her powers of magic…it wasn't earned through spirituality. It was given to her without understanding of its consequence."[600] Wanda fits the eternal types that Gilbert and Gubar describe for the monster woman. As a mutant, she is an accident of nature. The X-Men and their fellow mutants are repeatedly described

---

[598] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and David Finch (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #502 (Marvel Comics: November 2004) Cover

[599] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and David Finch (a) *Avengers* Vol. 1 #503 (Marvel Comics: December 2004) p. 7

[600] ibid p. 8

as "Accidents of nature"[601] by their enemies. Since Wanda did not earn her powers through spirituality, she cannot be angelic. As a mutant, Wanda is freakish, different, and unatural. Because of that, her powers are unhealthy and used to create children in an unnatural way. Dr. Strange asserts that her powers are dangerous have unforeseen consequences that cause her to kill her friends and loved ones.

Wanda and the dangers of her uncontrolled powers mirror the narrative of Jean Grey and her Phoenix powers. Wanda is part of a long line of women with powers who are unable to control them. It is this lack of control that the narrative uses as a cause for destruction. These are "Powers she did not earn nor can she control, powers she never fully understood,"[602] Dr. Strange tells the Avengers. Like Dark Phoenix, Wanda can not hope to control her power. That control can only come from patriarchal authority, an authority and control she has rejected as a monstrous woman. As Naomi Wolf points out, "Out of control female sexuality can turn her into a monster, or lead to her annihilation."[603] As a monster woman, Wanda must inevitably be silenced and annihilated.

To complete the comparison between Wanda and the monster woman, Dr. Strange points out how Wanda is only committed to her own private ends and to her own happiness above anyone else. "She says to herself: 'I deserve happiness. I want to bring something into this world that is good. That I can love.' And she gives birth to children,

---

[601] Chris Claremont (w) and Brent Anderson (a) *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007) p. 13

[602] Bendis (w) and Finch (a) *Avengers* #503 op cit p. 11

[603] Wolf *Promiscuities* op cit p. 83

even though she can't."[604] All of the crime fighting Wanda did, all of the villains she defeated, and the number of times she helped save earth, did not bring anything good into the world. In a patriarchal culture, the only good that women are truly capable of bringing into the world are children. Their ultimate goal and purpose is to be mothers and wives. And even though Wanda may want to fulfill this purpose, she cannot. For Wanda, the monster literally exists "in her lower half."[605] In a structure that values women primarily for their ability to have children, a woman being infertile and unable to have children is considered valueless, damaged, broken, or a monster. Even trying to use her powers to repair her brokenness is unacceptable since her powers are unhealthy and dangerous. Anything produced by those powers is suspect and a forgery of how patriarchy sees maternal and domestic roles. "She played mommy to make herself feel like someone she thinks is normal."[606] Dr. Strange assures the dominant position and the Avengers that normative gender performance is for women to be domestic and motherly. What Wanda did was false and pretended at best.

When the heroes finally confront Wanda, they find her once again with her unnaturally created children. She has selfishly used her powers to remake her sons with no husband and no father. The death and destruction she has caused is all side effects of her willful revolt against patriarchal control. "You killed The Vision Wanda! Your own husband!…You killed Scott Lang! You killed Hawkeye!…You've destroyed the

---

[604] Bendis (w) and Finch (a) *Avengers* #503 op cit p. 12

[605] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 76

[606] Bendis (w) and Finch (a) *Avengers* #503 op cit p. 12

Avengers! All of it, it's gone!"[607] Killing her own husband stands as a unique choice of defying patriarchal authority and power. In the end, all of the death and destruction is for something unnatural and transgressive. "Stay away from my children….You can't have them."[608] Wanda is still pretending to be a mother and is willing to kill all of her friends to keep pretending.

Even though the Avengers defeat Wanda, the danger she represents and the potential danger to patriarchy literally makes her a madwoman and forces her to be exiled to her own particular attic. "A life of feminine submission…is a life of silence…while a life of female rebellion…is a life that must be silenced."[609] Between the end of *Disassembled* and the beginning of *House of M*, Wanda is sent off to her attic to wallow in her madness and insanity where she can be silent and submissive. Professor X and Magneto - Wanda's father - take her to one of the destroyed and abandoned buildings on the island of Genosha.

High in one of Genosha's still standing skyscrapers, Wanda tries to create her children, but is constantly stopped and reprimanded by Professor X.[610] Xavier serves the function of constantly reminding Wanda that she is broken and any children she creates are unnatural. "You cannot have children. You never could."[611] Even though Wanda has been defeated by the Avengers and sequestered to her madness and her attic, the need to

---

[607] ibid p. 20

[608] ibid p. 20

[609] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 83

[610] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Olivier Coipel (a) *House of M* #1 (Marvel Comics: August 2005) p. 1-3

[611] ibid p. 3

keep her silent, to keep her rebellion in check, is not guaranteed. “We can’t keep drugging her and psychically putting her to sleep.”[612] For the mad, monster Wanda, the temptation to be rebellious, to defy the patriarchy is too strong, and she must be silenced. Though, where Jean was willing to commit suicide to silence herself, Wanda is unable to. “Am I a coward, for not wanting to kill myself? Even though I know I should?”[613] Wanda laments.

In western literary traditions, the act of female suicide is one of the two major ways that rebellious and nonconforming women are ultimately silenced. In the British novel, silencing and forcing a woman to conform to the angelic identity is most often achieved through the act of marriage and domestication. In the American tradition, those same things are achieved when the monstrous or rebellious woman drowns in the sea or takes her life in some other way.[614]

Dark Phoenix, like Kate Chopin’s Edna,[615] or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Zenobia,[616] is willing to silence herself and return to an angelic identity through suicide. The decision is “her commitment to the angelic tranquility of death”[617] In death, the monstrous woman can be made ultimately silent, submissive, and angelic. For Wanda though, through either her cowardice, or her willful rebellion of patriarchal constraints of

---

[612] ibid p. 6

[613] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Olivier Coipel (a) *House of M* #7 (Marvel Comics: November 2005) p. 10

[614] Leslie A. Fielder *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Anchor, 1992) p. 113

[615] Kate Chopin *The Awakening* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994)

[616] Nathaniel Hawthorne *The Blithedale Romance* (Middlesex, England: Penguin)

[617] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 254

her identity, is unwilling to commit suicide. Even with that unwillingness, she understands the inevitable need for the patriarchal power structure to normalize and silence her. It needs to reassert control over her and her identity. "It should have ended months ago."[618] She decides that when her former teammates arrive, "I'm not going to fight them."[619] To reassert patriarchal control and dominance over Wanda, the narrative demands that she must die. If she is unwilling to take her own life, then it is up to her teammates to silence her. As Professor X tells the assembled X-Men and Avengers, "We need to decide the fate of Wanda Maximoff."[620] In a patriarchal structure, Wanda has no say in her own fate, life, or identity. Either she conforms or she is rendered silent.

To her teammates, friends, and the dominant reading position, Wanda is still a monster woman. She has refused to be constrained or controlled. When the monster woman refuses to stay in her ordained place, she is called "bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster)."[621] This act of naming noncompliant and transgressive women this way, gives the narrative power to allay the anxiety and dread of the female autonomy they represent.[622] As Scarlet Witch, Wanda is already labeled with one of those bad names. After *Disassembled*, her former friends shorten it and refer to her as just a witch. "What if the *witch* gets board,"[623] "If word got out that the *witch* was responsible for what

---

[618] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #7 op cit p. 10

[619] ibid p. 10

[620] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #1 op cit p. 11

[621] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 28

[622] ibid p. 28

[623] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #1 op cit p. 17 emphasis mine

happened to the Avengers,"[624] and "the *witch* killed you months ago."[625] Unfortunately, even put Wanda away in her attic in Genosha, she is still a monster, still noncompliant, and the only option to silence her is to "put her down."[626]

Despite her assertions that she is willing to let her friends take her life, Wanda is deceptive and hides behind pretensions of an angelic identity. Like the first monster woman, Lilith, instead of submitting to the constraints and silencing of patriarchal authority,[627] Wanda flees to be with unnatural children, and to pretend at being a mother again. Because Wanda's powers allow her to alter and reconstruct reality, she pulls apart all of the Marvel Universe and recreates it in the form of the House of M. When the X-Men and Avengers arrive on Genosha, they are consumed by a glowing portal, a creation of Wanda and her unnatural and unhealthy powers. One of the last pages of the first issue of *House of M* is simply the portal radiating out and consuming everything. To let the reader know that the source of the power is feminine - and by extension unnatural - the portal is drawn unmistakably yonic.(Fig. 79)[628] In the


Fig. 79 Wanda's yonic and unnatural power

[624] ibid p. 17 emphasis mine

[625] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Olivier Coipel (a) *House of M* #4 (Marvel Comics: September 2005) p. 13 emphasis mine

[626] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #1 op cit p. 15

[627] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 35

[628] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #1 op cit p. 24

world of House of M, Wanda has created a universe where the heroes could have "what [they] always wanted."[629] But no matter how close to a utopia this new world may be, it is created through unhealthy and unnatural means. Because the new universe has been constructed with female power, it is expected that the heroes will band together and defy it. The creation of the new universe also reinforces Wanda being "committed to her own filthy ends."[630] Even though she has created a universe where everyone else gets what they want, that is only to distract them and keep them from interfering with her and her newly created children.

Wanda is again pretending to normalize herself. Again, like Lilith who goes to live with her demon children, Wanda goes to a fairy tail kingdom of Genosha that she has created along with her own fake and unnatural children. "You've created so much lately"[631] Doctor Strange points out to Wanda. In unison, Wanda and one of her sons respond, "That's what mommies do."[632] Wanda acts and performs like an angelic, domestic woman, but deep down she is still a broken and damaged monster woman. Even though she has brought dead teammate Hawkeye back to life in this world, she still killed him and other heroes. She still needs to be silenced and constrained. "I was hoping if I couldn't kill you for all the %?&$ [sic] you've done, I thought at least maybe I'd snap you out of your crazy."[633] The resurrected Hawkeye tells Wanda after putting an arrow in

---

[629] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #4 op cit p. 16

[630] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 76

[631] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #7 op cit p. 6

[632] ibid p. 6

[633] ibid p. 16

her back and before he is killed again, pulled into tiny lego like pieces and scattered in the wind.

Wanda as a monster woman, if nothing else, is constantly portrayed as crazy or insane. “She lost control,” “She went nuts,” and “She was out of control and out of her mind.”[634] The potential of a woman’s madness is enough to make her a monster. By labeling Wanda as crazy or mad creates a connection between her yonic, female powered portal and the madness and unnatural nature of those powers. “As if to cement the connection between femaleness and madness, or at least mental deformity - ‘a weak or wounded brain admits no cure.’”[635] Wanda is the plague that The Vision warned the Avengers about, and her unhealthy power can not fix anything. Her madness makes her unwilling to submit and conform to patriarchy. Until she is stopped, she will continue to destroy, damage, and harm. As Hawkeye tries to tell her “You don’t even know what you’ve done.”[636]

As the heroes begin to prevail over yet another attempt by Wanda to defy patriarchal authority and to no longer remain silent, Wanda commits one final, monstrous act. Acknowledging herself as unnatural and her power unhealthy, Wanda declares, “We’re freaks!! Mutants!!”[637] Using her powers one more time, she returns the world to it’s previous state, but with one major change, “No more mutants.”[638] Instead of

---

[634] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #4 op cit p. 10

[635] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 62

[636] Bendis (w) and Coipel (a) *House of M* #7 op cit p. 6

[637] ibid p. 22

[638] ibid p. 23

pretending to be a mommy and to create things, Wanda destroys. With a single phrase, Wanda reduces the number of powered mutants in the Marvel Universe from millions to just a few hundred. Her final, monstrous act, becomes a form of power genocide.[639] In that final moment, Wanda does what she has been unable to do up till now. With the depowering of all those mutants, she also depowers herself and wipes her own memory.[640] She finally silences herself. She masochistically rips apart all the aspects of herself that were noncompliant, unhealthy, and unnatural. She renders herself submissive, silent, and finally angelic. Like the lobotomy ending of *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, Wanda is also, powerless, rendered essentially dead.

Like Dark Phoenix before her, and a number of other literary witches and monster women, Wanda plays out the role of madwoman and monster perfectly. She comes to represent the fears and anxieties at the potential of autonomous female identity and uncontrolled female power. Patriarchal power requires complete control of the female body, identity, and autonomy. Who they are, what they can do, must be constrained by expectations of gendered performance, and the desires of male power. "Women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts, generated solely…by male expectations and designs."[641] The identities and possibles that women are capable of achieving, the nature of their rebirth, and how their new identity is constructed is constantly subject to the designs, expectations, and desires of the dominant reading position. To deliver them the

---

[639] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Olivier Coipel (a) *House of M* #8 (Marvel Comics: December 2005) p. 12

[640] ibid p. 23

[641] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 12

expected meaning and pleasure, the female identity must be constantly constrained to assuage the anxiety and dread that is present in the idea of female autonomy and agency.

For the women in superhero comics, identities are constructed by patriarchal authority, to be submissive to already existing male identities. Because those identities are constructed through patriarchal authority, those identities are often not permanent. The patriarchal authority allows access to the super-powered world, but it can also eject anyone if they become to willfully noncompliant. Women who are without male permission or influence in their identity and interpretation of self are marked as fake, mad, or inferior. The women of the DC and Marvel universes must conform to roles of angel or monster, to meet the expectations of the dominant position. Any enemy agents or transgressors of those expectations are normalized, silenced, or corrected by the narrative and logonomic system.

While contradictions to the expectations of the dominant position and fissures in the logonomic system may exist, it is the function of the logonomic system to correct them. Soon the narrative will be brought back in line with the expectations and desires of the dominant reading position. Their fear and dread must be absorbed by the narrative. It must work to perform their understanding and perception of the world and gender relations in the world outside of the comics themselves.

Conclusion

Part of the argument put forward in Gilbert and Guber's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* is that male texts function as prisons and that inside of them, women and their representatives are constrained and confined to specific roles and spaces within those texts. "Either they are inclined to immobilize themselves with suffocating tight-laces in the glass coffins of patriarchy, or they are tempted to destroy themselves by doing fiery and suicidal tarantellas out of the looking glass."[642] Comics, and specifically superhero comics, have been constructed and are perceived as predominantly male texts. For almost 50 years, the comics published by Marvel and DC have been made by, and for, a hetero-male audience. The scope and focus of publication narrowed as a perceived dominant reading position was cultivated, and the audience that regularly read comics shrunk from its pre-code boom. With a smaller audience, publishers found ways to try and give that smaller audience more of what they wanted. Means of production, publication, and consumption were refined to meet the needs of, and keep, the die-hard fans. Soon comics disappeared from the news stands and found their way into specialty comic shops. It became a mark of acceptance and belonging in the comic fan culture to actually know where to find comics and to understand their monthly publishing schedule. To engage in comic discourse, it was necessary for fans and readers to decode the complex storylines and histories that have built up over time.

---

[642] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 44

Male editors and creators at Marvel and DC created comics that would be delivered to male operated and staffed comic shops and then be purchased by young and middle aged male readers. It should come as no surprise that the ingrained idea of superhero comics as male centric stories, or inherently male narratives, became doxa in the discourse of superhero comics. The logonomic system, through the communication between producers and readers and the spaces set up for that communication to take place, allowed Marvel and DC to better deliver an expected meaning and pleasure to the group they saw as the dominant reading position. The perception of that position as elusively male dictated that those narratives would transmit a meaning of male privilege, dominance, and control. With other outside forces like the comics code constraining meaning even more, the superhero genre became a genre of strong, powerful, and active male figures. Publishers either completely ignored or minimized female characters and experience because it did not reflect the image of the fans buying comics. When one gender controls the production, consumption, and discourse of a narrative, that is reflected in the representations found in the narrative.

As male texts, the superhero comics presented women that reflected the gendered performances and expectations of patriarchal power structures and the patriarchal apparatus of male dominance and female dominated. Within patriarchal structures, women are constrained, controlled, and silenced by the apparatus of that structure. If women are perceived of as subversive or transgressive, the apparatus works to punish or normalize them. While superhero comics are not a exact recreation of the real world, they still reflect representations, performances, and expectations women. These

representations transmit an idea that normalized, or idealized woman, are silent, submissive, and sexually available.

In the Bechdel test, DeConnick's Sexy Lamp test, Wolf's examination of texts, and Gilbert and Guber's literary analysis, an overwhelming theme of silence permeates the roles of women in literature, film, and comics. In superhero comics, silence becomes an ultimate sign of submission. The apparatus and methods that assure female silence are foundational to patriarchal power and control. In superhero comics, they are woven into the tropes, syntagm, and cliches of the genre. Female silence and submission becomes an expected part of the way fundamental ideas of the superhero narrative works. The way female power is presented and constructed in superhero comics means that in narratives that are fundamentally about power, female characters are left overwhelming powerless. Making patriarchal ideas of control and power part of how female characters receive and use powers means these characters are constructed at the most basic level to be less than, submissive to, and dependent on their male counterparts. These female characters are constrained to normalized ideas of gender performance that meet the expectations and desires of a dominant, male, reading position. The female characters that do not conform or submit, function allegorically as symbols of noncompliant, unnatural, and unhealthy women that are either normalized to their expected gender roles or destroyed and annihilated for their subversive transgression.

Within the tropes of powers, costumes, and identities, the women of the Marvel and DC Comics universes run into the same old apparatuses of patriarchal control and constraint that have functioned to control women in predominantly patriarchal cultures.

For She-Hulk, Rogue, and Poison Ivy, their powers are dependent on already existing male authority and power. Control of their power is dependent on men to constrain it, dictate it, and define it. Similarly, the perception of female sexuality is that it exists in part for male pleasure and use. Without male control or constraint to guide, dictate, and define female sexuality, it is perceived as dangerous, depraved, or unnatural. As Naomi Wolf put it, female sexuality can only be understood or enjoyed "safely only in the presence of a boy."[643] Outside of that context, female sexuality, or subversive female power, is frightening and destructive.

To be sexually normalized and to perform female sexuality correctly, means to wait and be available or to be seen rather than seeing. To be sexually normalized is to be Rogue the Southern Belle. She is sexually available and seen by the male gaze. The rules of her performance constrain her an make her sexuality a prize to be won by the perfect southern gentleman. The sexually subversive Harley Quinn was able to follow her own desire and purse the objet of her affection. She was also normalized into being a passive, waiting, and silent woman. To be sexually free and unconstrained powers is to be loud and transgressive. Dark Phoenix and Wanda are monsters, witches, and sluts, and in patriarchal cultures "To be found out as sluts, is to die (socially, culturally)."[644] In superhero comics, that death can be literal. To be found out as a slut or to be monstrous, requires the character to be normalized for the narrative to absorb male dread and to silence the transgressive woman. This silencing, or normalizing, can take the form of

---

[643] Wolf *Promescuities* op cit p. 46

[644] ibid p. 73

Dark Phoenix's suicide, Jean Grey's lobotomy, or Wanda's depowering and memory wipe. Poison Ivy, Jean, and Wanda, are mad women. Their powers and sexuality are unconstrained and out of control. Eventually, they are locked away in asylums and attics. They are like the women diagnosed with hysteria and nymphomania. They are diagnosed as broken, unhealthy, and in need of a cure. In the end, no matter how damaging that cure may be, as long as it silences and normalizes the transgressive woman, it is a worthwhile cure.

Along with their powers, the way the female body and the costumes that they wear to fight and commit crime in is constructed, presented, and revealed in superhero comics is to reflect the way value and worth is assigned to the female body. To perform femaleness correctly means to have a body that is constantly transmitting an idea of hyper femininity. By making the female costume as revealing and skimpy as possible, the primal markers of female sex are always on display. For characters like Power Girl, Witchblade, and Starfire, to be stripped down and in the constant state of disrobing makes them unmistakably female and primarily their bodies. For these women to have a voice or identity is not important. For them to be seen and to be revealed is their primary role. The only value they have is located in their bodies and how well their bodies conform to standards of beauty.

Voodoo, Catwoman, and Psylocke are molded, contorted, and constructed within the panel and on the page to be perfectly formed, desirable, bodies and breasts. They are constantly young, taut, and athletic. Their breasts and bodies defy gravity, age, and rules of anatomy. They are first and foremost their bodies and the femaleness those bodies

represent. They are created and constrained to be seen and objectified. If those bodies and costumes become too unfeminine or androgynous, they become as fearful as the unchecked power of Wanda or Jean. They must be stripped down, reformed, and rebuilt into perfect, submissive, sex objects. Like being synched into a corset, or having their feet bound, women like Psylocke and Amanda Waller must be rebuilt. From heavy set to skinny and buxom, or armoured and European, to sleek and Asian, they need to conform to the assumed desires of a dominant reading position.

For the women of superhero comics, because patriarchy has been influential in constraining the method of acquiring power and limiting it's use, as well as constructing and defining the body and the costume, patriarchal constraint and control is already implicit in the new identities and roles that women are allowed to perform. To be a heroes or villains is performing a versions of those roles that conform to male definitions, dictates, and constraints. To enter in to the superhero world, women must be defined by male experience, expectation, and authority. Their ex-utero rebirth needs to be facilitated by patriarchal authority. Women who try to avoid patriarchal authority or control are labeled as fake, childish, or less than. They are normalized to the power structure and rules that have already been formed for them.

If Kathy Kane or Storm want to participate in the male centric world of powers, they must do it defined by the men that they are required to submit to. But even after receiving patriarchal approval and permission, their possibles and identities are transitory at best. The identity of being Batgirl, Queen of Wakanda, or even just Harley Quinn are identities formed, owned, and defined by patriarchal authority. At any time those

identities can be stripped away and given to some else. The identities of these women are constructed not so they can define themselves, but so they can be defined by men. Their identities become how men see them and how men categorize them. Who they are must fall within the dichotomies of angle/monster and madonna/whore. They are labeled by patriarchal authority as either mothers, wives, daughters, or lovers. They are angelic women who submit to patriarchal authority and become extensions of male experience and male voices. To be subversive or transgressive to that authority marks them as monster women. They are the witch, bitch, and slut. They are enemy agents and will inevitably be destroyed, silenced, and normalized.

Since the birth of the silver age of superheroes, with Marvel's launch of the *Fantastic Four* and DC's reinvention of The Flash and Green Lantern, the superhero genre of comics has constructed massive, sweeping narratives, inhabited by super powered beings and aliens. These narratives have been constructed for a decidedly male centric dominant reading position with little thought for the potential of other positions within the domain of comics. Because of this, they have come to reflect a world concerned and focused predominantly on male experience, identity, and power. Any other gendered representation is secondary and interpreted through an already existing male centric lens.

Gilbert and Guber offer a moment of rebellion and a push against the patriarchal forces that dictate women's roles: "despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility…texts have been possible."[645]

---

[645] Gilbert and Guber op cit p. 44

Superhero comics have gone through phase after phase of change. The types of stories and characters that have existed from the Golden Age to the Silver, Bronze, Dark, and now in the Modern Age have seen moments of change in how representation happens. Though superhero comics have been slow to change, it has happened. After picking up the first appearance of Black Panther, Dwayne McDuffy said in regards to representation, "In the space of 15 pages, black people moved from invisible to inevitable."[646] Once that first loud and subversive female character appears and is never normalized by the logonomic system, that system begins to lose it's power and effectiveness.

While the logonomic system has worked to deliver and maintain a message of male dominance and female submissiveness, in the last few years it has become more and more difficult for the logonomic system to keep out new positions and demands on production. At the time of this writing, the comics industry has been experiencing a new surge and expansion over the last few years. A medium and industry that was considered dead after the speculator's market crashed in the 1990s, is now seen as alive and vibrant.[647] Independent and creator owned comics have become more prevalent and popular. While Marvel and DC still take the top two spots of marketshare, other publishers with a focus on multiple genres and more divers representations are gaining ground fast.[648]

---

[646] Wolk op cit. p 120

[647] Heidi McDonald "Breaking News: The Comics Industry Is Not Dying" *The Beat* (June 12, 2013) <http://www.comicsbeat.com/breaking-news-the-comics-industry-is-not-dying/>

[648] Rich Johnston "Image Comics' October Marketshare Jumps To 12.28%" *Bleeding Cool* (November 5, 2014) <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/11/05/image-comicss-october-marketshare-jumps-to-12-28/>

In just the last few years, Image Comics, once the home of comically huge breasts, strippers, prostitutes, and half naked pinups has seen the content of their publishing line completely changed. Image's new focus on diverse voices, storylines, characters, and titles has brought renewed interest to the medium of comics. Diversity and improved representation has become a focus for the publisher. Image comics editor and chief, Eric Stephenson even noted that "For decades, the comics industry has been viewed as a boys club, but that is changing."[649] And that one of the goals of Image is to "create more diversity in comics." [650] The new titles and their creators at Image understand the massively diverse readership that the comics medium appeals to. Female led titles like *Sex Criminals*, *The Wicked+The Divine*, and the unapologetically feminist *Bitch Planet* have started to out sale major titles at both Marvel and DC. And at the same time, attracting a larger female audience to the medium. Even Marvel Comics Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso has noted that the comics industry is entering a "golden age for female superheroes."[651] and Babs Tarr, artist on the newly relaunched and redesigned *Batgirl*, sees a "renaissance of feminism…in the comics industry."[652] It is hard to not see a shift in the publishing strategies of the major comic publishers.

Along with new titles, the advent of digital comic sales and the proliferation of e-readers means that more readers can avoid the male centric comic shops and still keep up

---

[649] Eric Stephenson "Eric Stephenson's Keynote From the Sand Diego Image Expo" *Comics Alliance* (June 25, 2014) <http://comicsalliance.com/eric-stephenson-keynote-address-san-diego-image-expo/>

[650] ibid

[651] Brian Prowse-Gany "Rise of the Female Superhero" *Yahoo News* (August 12, 2015) <https://www.yahoo.com/katiecouric/rise-of-the-female-superhero-ever-since-superman-126459307033.html>

[652] ibid

to date with their favourite characters. With many of the male dominated requirements in place to consume comics removed, space and fractures in the field of comics have opened and allowed different reading positions to claim territory and mark positions. Many of these new readers and those staking claim to characters and titles have been decidedly female. With this growing new demographic, both DC and Marvel have had to change.

In 2014, Marvel Comics released its all new, rebooted *Ms. Marvel*. The title, written by G. Willow Wilson, introduced a young, Pakistani American, Muslim girl as the title character. The title has been absent the expected sexualization and ever present patriarchal authority that has dominated Marvel's titles. *Ms. Marvel*'s sales skyrocketed and it is outselling many of the classic Marvel characters currently being published. Even more interesting, though exact figures are not available, *Ms. Marvel* has been outselling all of Marvel's other titles on digital platforms.[653] *Ms. Marvel* joined the already popular *Captain Marvel*, written by Kelly Sue DeConnick. This comic starred the previous Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers who jettisoned her old bathing suit style costume for a new, military looking flight suit. Both titles have been focused almost exclusively on female characters, relationships, and friendships. With positive critical and fan response for these titles, Marvel has also launched a new Thor, who is the previous Thor's old girlfriend Jane Foster (a character played by Natalie Portman in the recent films) being the only one worthy to wild Mjolnir. Along with that has come the popular *Spider-Gwen* an alternate dimension version of Gwen Stacy -the onetime girlfriend of Spider-Man who was

---

[653] ibid

fridged[654] - who was bitten by the radioactive spider instead of Peter Parker. These titles mirrored efforts at DC to become more gender diverse.

The already mentioned *Harley Quinn* written by husband and wife team Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti has, instead of embracing the retconned version of the character, decided to make a book that focuses on female experience and female relationships. The popularity of this title has led to Conner and Palmiotti being given another title to reimagine. The team has just started publishing *Starfire*. The recently rebooted version of the character has been rebooted again, giving her a new costume that covers up more than even her classic costume and putting her in Key West Florida. She is no longer an unfeeling, emotionally void sex object, but a visitor from the stars who wants to help her new friend, a female detective with the Key West police.

Along with DC's changes for Harley and Starfire, their family of Batbooks has also seen an infusion of diverse characters and female friendships. DC offers the new *Batgirl* featuring Barbara Gordon in the title role. Barbara is now concerned with going to college and hanging out with friends as well as fighting crime. Similarly, *Gotham Academy* focuses on Olivia Silverlocke and her friend Maps as they attend a boarding school in the heart of Gotham. And finally, *Black Canary* staring the character Black Canary as the lead singer of a rock band.

At the time of this writing, many of these titles are brand new and how long they will maintain and keep the type of content they do have is yet to be determined. An important thing to note with these titles though is that all of them have at least one

---

[654] Gerry Conway (w) and Gil Kane (a) *Amazing Spider-Man* Vol. 1 #121 (Marvel Comics: June 1973) p. 28

woman on their creative teams. Either writing or drawing, the inclusion of women does seem to have an impact on the actual content of the text. This, of course, should come as no surprise. This is why it is important that even looking at the textual examples and analysis throughout this thesis, that representation does not always equal inclusion. Since G. Willow Wilson is a Muslim woman, her creation, Kamala Khan reflects and highlights a female Muslim experience. Similarly, the clothing and costume choices in *Batgirl* and *Black Canary* reflect a more realistic, less objectified and sexualized clothing choices. With the titles being drawn by women, Babs Tar and Annie Wu respectively, the bodies and costumes reflect a more accurate and diverse female experience. So the question still remains, when these creators leave these titles (as inevitably happens) what will happen to the characters?

Kelly Sue DeConnick has just recently announced her departure from *Captain Marvel*. While a new female writer has been announced, there still remains the question of whether the logonomic system will be used to take advantage of the change and correct the fissure that a title like *Captain Marvel* has created. Drop in revenue or a stall in the growth of a type of readers could easily cause a retrenchment and reboot back to a male centric universe. All of these mentioned DC Comics titles are part of yet another reboot of their line and universe. Just four years after the arrival of the New 52, those titles are slowly being replaced by the titles of DCYOU. At the time of this writing, the new universe rebuilding event at Marvel, *Secret Wars*, is only a few issues away from completion and the slate of new titles that will follow look to be even more strongly focused on gender diversity.

Along with the introduction of new titles, there is a growing awareness on the part of writers and artists of the expectations and desires of these new reading positions. After receiving criticism from fans and the trans community over issues in the newly redesigned *Batgirl* #37[655] creators Cameron Stewart, Brenden Fletcher, and Babs Tarr issued an apology and vowed to make restitution.[656] A few months later, when the first collection of the new *Batgirl* arc was released, the issue in question had been rewritten and the offensive aspects of the story were removed. It has become obvious that while the logonomic system is still functioning in superhero comics, it is currently not capable of handling all the fissures and points of conflict created from new reading positions claiming positions in the field.

Even with these changes occurring in the comics field, there are still issues of diversity and representation. In this thesis, I have specifically attempted to look at issues of gender and gender relations. However, there are still issues of race and sexuality that need to be examined. In the analysis of characters like Storm and Amanda Waller, there is a need for a closer examination into how race plays into those representations and the roles of people of color in superhero comics. While the number of female characters is minuscule in comparison to the male characters, the number of black and latino characters pales even in comparison to that small number. Looking at characters like Storm and Amanda Waller through a more intersectional feminist lens, and how race

---

[655] Brenden Fletcher (w), Cameron Stewart (w)(a) and Babs Tarr (a) *Batgirl* Vol. 4 #37 (DC Comics: February 2015) p. 23

[656] Andrew Wheeler "'Batgirl' #37 Criticized for Transphobia; Creators Apologize" *Comics Alliance* (December 15, 2014) <http://comicsalliance.com/batgirl-37-criticized-for-transphobic-content-creative-team-apologizes/>

affects their portrayals and the portrayals of other minority female characters, while outside the scope of this thesis, are important to understanding representation. The roles of other minorities have also been, until recently, often overlooked. With Marvel introducing a new half black, half Puerto Rican Spider-Man, Miles Morales,[657] DC's reimagining of their Wally West Flash, and a new Robin as a young black man, how these characters are treated and the tropes that dictate their racial performance should be examined more closely.

Similarly, aside from Kathy Kane, the new Batwoman, sexuality in this thesis is predominantly focused on norms of heterosexuality. Like with the growth of female representation in comics of late, representation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans characters has been on the rise. In the summer of 2011, Marvel Comics published *Astonishing X-Men* #51. The issue was the marriage of Canadian mutant Northstar to his boyfriend, marking the first same sex marriage in comics. The issue coincided with marriage equality being approved in New York state and even included an ad at the end of the issue, informing New York residents the steps to take to get their marriage licenses.[658]

Within the comics field, LGBT reading positions and interpretations of comic texts have become more widespread. The superhero narrative has found its way into episodes of *Rupaul's Dragrace*[659] and queer readings of X-Men have highlighted the

---

[657] Brian Michael Bendis (w) and Sara Pichelli (a) *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* Vol. 2 #1 (Marvel Comics: November 2011)

[658] Marjorie Liu (w) and Mike Perkins (a) *Astonishing X-Men* Vol. 3 #51 (Marvel Comics: August 2012)

[659] "Dynamic Drag Duos." In *Rupaul's All Stars Drag Race* (Logo TV: November 19, 2012)

strong connections between the othering of LGBT individuals with the othering of mutants in the X-Men universe. With superhero comic's obsession with hyper masculinity and felinity, queer readings of the history of the characters and their histories have massive potential. Issues of LGBT representation is also an area of flux within superhero comics. While more LGBT characters have appeared and other long running characters have come out as gay, these moments and transitions are often momentary things. Even with all of the attention *Astonishing X-Men* #51 received, after writer Marjorie Liu left the book, North Star and his husband haven't been seen in any of the X-Men books. Issues of LGBT representation is an issue that superhero comics as a whole doesn't yet know how to work with. Since Wertham's claims that Batman and Robin were modeling an ideal gay lifestyle, comics discourse has had an uneasy relationship with gayness in particular. Lesbian sexuality often gets relegated to the realm of hetero-normative fantasies and fetishes of the lipstick lesbian. However, the dominant position in comics doesn't yet understand how to reconcile the image of hyper masculine men being the objects of desire for other men.

Comics have become the new pop culture thing. San Diego Comic Con is now one of the biggest hollywood media events of the year.[660] There are currently 40 plus comics being developed and adapted into television shows across a number stations and production companies.[661] This does not include the slate of shows already on the air and

---

[660] "About Comic-Con International." *Comic-Con International: San Diego*. (May 28, 2012) < http://www.comic-con.org/about>

[661] Rob Lean "44 Upcoming Comic Book TV Shows, and When to Expect Them." *Den of Geek* (August 20, 2015) <http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/comic-book-tv-shows/33601/35-upcoming-comic-book-tv-shows-and-when-to-expect-them>

ready for new seasons in fall 2015. DC Comics alone will be airing at least 5 shows based on their properties in the new fall season.[662] These of course do not take into account the money making juggernaut that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Comics are the new well of intellectual property that Hollywood studios are going to. Unfortunately, many of these adaptations are not only taking the characters and story arcs, but also the problematic representations of female characters. With Scarlett Johansson unzipped and heaving cleavage mid fight in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* or Margo Robbie wearing Harley Quinn's New 52 costume for the upcoming *Suicide Squad,* the image of superhero women as sexualized and objectified seems to have jumped mediums.

The creators of these adaptations still listen to the complaints and criticism of the comic's dominant and most vocal fans. This group demands more authentic adaptations that line up exactly with their reading experience. The changing of Johnny Storm to black in the new *Fantastic Four* or the potential of the next Spider-Man film casting a female Spider-Man inevitably leads to internet outrage and demands that the film stay true to the nature and perception of their beloved characters. The fan base demands a seamless adaptation, even if the concepts they demand are problematic or only an intrinsic aspect of their perception of the character.

However, as female readers return to the comics medium and begin demanding better representation and inclusion of their own experiences in the comics, the question remains if those representations will soon become the doxic and canonical versions of those characters. And if they do, will they then influence future adaptations and

---

[662] "DC Comics TV" *DC Comics* <http://www.dccomics.com/tv>

representations in other media? The logonomic system is still functions and strives to deliver on its promise of delivering a desired meaning to a consecrated and cultivated audience. For every advance in female representation, there is a demand for a return to the old stories and status quo of a few years before. Fissures and classes between positions may be too numerous for the system to handle all of them, but that doesn't stop retcons and reboots from allowing the dominant position to reactivate and reassert dominance over a particular character or corner of the field. Whatever the outcome, there is right now a change in the way the medium of comics is perceived and the perceptions of the audience that is reading and enjoying comics. I believe Image Comics Editor-in-Chief, Eric Stephenson sums it up best,

> "An industry status quo was set back then that ensured comics were primarily read by young, white men, and that resulted in a talent pool that consisted, by and large, of young, white men. If we want to build a more diverse industry, though, if we want to develop a more diverse talent pool, then it is of utmost importance that we produce comics that appeal to as wide an audience as possible, because people who aren't reading comics are not going to suddenly decide they want to work in this business."[663]

As more female readers come into comics, they eventually can see themselves as creators of comics. When female creators get involved in the process of creating comics, representation begins to change. As women and other groups that are not young, white, heterosexual men enter the field, the closed circle of production and consumption that has

---

[663] Eric Stephenson op cit

allowed the logonomic system to force and transmit one single, narrow meaning to the perceived dominant reading position, can no longer be used to constrain meaning and force out new readers and reading positions.

Bibliography

Aaron, Jason(w), and Adam Kubert(a). *Avengers Vs. X-Men* #9. Marvel Comics, October 2012.

Aaron, Jason(w), and David Lopez(a). *Wolverine and the X-Men* Volume 1 #24. Marvel Comics, March 2013.

Aaron, Jason(w), and Esad Ribic(a). *Thor: God of Thunder* #23. Marvel Comics, August 2014.

"About Comic-Con International." Comic-Con International: San Diego. May 28, 2012. Accessed September 27, 2015.

Alonso, Axel. "Black Panther/Storm Wedding Press Conference." Newsarama.com. November 23, 2005. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

Asp, Eldon(w), and John Stipsman(a). *Team Youngblood* #14. Image Comics, October 1994.

Asselin, Janelle. "Let's Talk about How Some Men Talk to Women in Comics." Janelle Rambles. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Asselin, Janelle. "Anatomy of a Bad Cover: DC's New 'Teen Titans' #1." Comic Book Resources. April 11, 2014. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Azzarello, Brian(w), and Cliff Chiang(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 4 #4. DC Comics, February 2012.

Azzarello, Brian(w), and Cliff Chiang(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 4 #7. DC Comics, May 2012.

Azzarello, Brian(w), and Jim Lee(a). *Superman* Volume 2 #204. DC Comics, June 2004.

Azzarello, Brian(w), and Goran Sudzuka(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 4 #30. DC Comics, June 2014.

Azzarello, Brian(w), and Goran Sudzuka(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 4 #31. DC Comics, June 2014.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Bechdel, Alison. "Testy." Dykes to Watch Out For. November 8, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Bechdel, Alison. *The Essential Dykes to Watch out for*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008.

Bender, Hy., and Neil Gaiman. *The Sandman Companion*. New York: Vertigo/DC Comics, 1999.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Mark Bagley(a). *Ultimate Spider-Man,*. 2nd ed. New York: Marvel, 2009.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Frank Cho(a). *Mighty Avengers* Volume 1 #3. Marvel Comics, July 2007.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Oliver Coipel(a). *Avengers Vs. X-Men* #11. Marvel Comics, November 2012.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Oliver Coipel(a). *House of M* #1. Marvel Comics, August 2005.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Oliver Coipel(a). *House of M* #4. Marvel Comics, September 2005.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Oliver Coipel(a). *House of M* #7. Marvel Comics, November 2005.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Oliver Coipel(a). *House of M* #8. Marvel Comics, December 2005.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and David Finch(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #500. Marvel Comics, September 2004.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and David Finch(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #501. Marvel Comics, October 2004.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and David Finch(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #502. Marvel Comics, November 2004.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and David Finch(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #503. Marvel Comics, December 2004.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Adam Kubert(a). *Avengers Vs. X-Men* #8. Marvel Comics, September 2012.

Bendis, Brian Michael(w), and Sara Pichelli(a). *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* Volume 2 #1. Marvel Comics, November 2011.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting :, 2008.

"Beware the Valkyries." Beware the Valkyries. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Bongco, Mila. *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*. New York: Garland Pub., 2000.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Translated by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Braun, Kyle. "UGO's Guid to Ninjas." UGO. May 16, 2008. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Broome, John(w), and Gil Cane(a). "Secret of the Flaming Spear." *Showcase* Volume 1 #22. DC Comics, October 1959.

Bukatman, Scott. *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*: 40.4, 1988.

Butler, Judith. "Performativity's Social Magic." *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Shusterman. Blackwell, 1998.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Byrne, John. *Avengers West Coast* #51. Marvel Comics, November 1989.

Byrne, John. *Avengers West Coast* #52. Marvel Comics, December 1989.

Byrne, John(w), and Jim Lee(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #4. Marvel Comics, January 1992.

Byrne, John(w), and Jim Lee(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #5. Marvel Comics, February 1992.

Byrne, John(w), and Whilce Portacio(w)(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #282. Marvel Comics, November 1991.

Calloway, Peter(w), and Andres Guipaldo(a). *Gotham City Sirens* #21. DC Comics, May 2011.

Carrier, David. *The Aesthetics of Comics*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

Carey, Mike(w), and Chris Bachalo(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #199. Marvel Comics, July 2007.

Carey, Mike(w), and Mike Choi(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #204. Marvel Comics, December 2007.

Carey, Mike(w), Scot Eaton and Marco Cheechetto(a). *X-Men: Legacy* Volume 1 #215. Marvel Comics, October 2008.

Carey, Mike(w), Scot Eaton(a). *X-Men: Legacy* Volume 1 #224. Marvel Comics, July 2009.

Carter, David. "DC Comics Month-to Month Sales: June 2015 – The Divergent Series." The Beat. August 13, 2015. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Secret Origin. Directed by Mac Carter. Warner Home Video, 2010. Film.

Choi, Brandon(w), and Jim Lee(a)(w). *WildC.A.T.S* Volume 1 #1. Image Comics, August 1992.

Choi, Brandon(w), and Jim Lee(a)(w). *WildC.A.T.S* Volume 1 #8. Image Comics, February 1994.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Brent Anderson(a). *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*. 2nd ed. New York, N.Y.: Marvel, 2011.

Claremont, Chris(w), and John Byrne(a). *Phoenix: The Untold Story*. Marvel Comics, April 1984.

Claremont, Chris(w), and John Byrne(a). *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga*. New York, N.Y.: Marvel Comics, 2006.

Claremont, Chris(w), and John Byrne(a). *X-Men* Volume 1 #125. Marvel Comics, September 1979.

Claremont, Chris(w), and John Byrne(w)(a). “Cry…Vengance!” *Marvel Team-Up* Volume 1 #100. Marvel Comics, December 1980.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Dave Cockrum(a). *X-Men* Volume 1 #101. Marvel Comics, October 1976.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Dave Cockrum(a). *X-Men* Volume 1 #105. Marvel Comics, June 1977.

Claremont, Chris(W), and Richard Bennett(a). *Avengers Annual* Volume 1 #10. Marvel Comics, August 1981.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Jim Lee(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #255. Marvel Comics, December 1989.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Jim Lee(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #256. Marvel Comics, December 1989.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Jim Lee(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #258. Marvel Comics, February 1990.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Marc Silvestri(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #255. Marvel Comics, December 1989.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Paul Smith(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #173. Marvel Comics, September 1973.

Claremont, Chris(w), and Herb Trimpe(a). *Captain Britain* Volume 1 #8. Marvel UK, December 1976.

"Comics Code Revision of 1971." Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Accessed September 19, 2015.

"Comics Code Revision of 1989." Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Conner, Amanda and Jimmy Palmiotti(w), and Chad Hardin(a). *Harley Quinn* Volume 2 #11. DC Comics, December 2014.

Conway, Gerry(w), and Howard Chaykin(a). *Marvel Preview* #2. Marvel Comics, January 1975.

Conway, Gerry(w), and Gil Kane(a). *Amazing Spider-Man* #121. Marvel Comics, June 1973.

Cook, Marcy. "Airboy #2's Transmisogynistic Tropes and Their Dangerous Impact on Trans Women." The Mary Sue. July 3, 2015. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Cornell, Paul(w), and Tom Raney and John Paul Leon(a). *Black Widow: Deadly Origin* #2. Marvel Comics, February 2010.

Cotton, Mike. "Last Call: Preparing for Retirement, Alan Moore Reflects on His Accomplishments." Wizard Universe. May 11, 2006. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Daniel, Tony S. *Batman: Battle for the Cowl* #3. DC Comics, July 2009

Daniels, Les, and Chip Kidd. *Wonder Woman: The Life and times of the Amazon Princess : The Complete History*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004.

Darowski, Joseph J. *The Ages of Wonder Woman Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing times*.

"DC Comics TV." DC Comics. Accessed September 27, 2015.

DeConnick, Kelly Sue(w), and Andrea Mutti(a). *Rescue* #1. Marvel Comics, July 2010.

DeFalco, Tom(w), and Paul Ryan(a). *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #371. Marvel Comics, December 1992.

Delany, Samuel R. *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, Published by University Press of New England, 1999.

Dicky, Eric Jerome(w), and David Yardin(a). *Storm* Volume 2 #2. Marvel Comics, May 2006.

Dicky, Eric Jerome(w), and David Yardin(a). *Storm* Volume 2 #4. Marvel Comics, May 2006.

Dini, Paul(w), and Yvel Guichet(a). *Batman: Harley Quinn*.

Dini, Paul(w), and Guillem March(a). *Gotham City Sirens* #9. DC Comics, April 2010.

Dini, Paul(w), and Bruce W. Timm(a). *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. New York: DC Comics, 1994.

Dixon, Chuck(w), and Jim Aparo(a). *Batman* Volume 1 #560. DC Comics, December 1998.

Dutch, Dana(w), and Matt Baker(a). "I Tempted the Wrong Boy." *Pictorial Romance* #7. St. John, May 1951.

"Dynamic Drag Duos." In *Rupaul's All Stars Drag Race*. Logo TV. November 19, 2012.

Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Fla.: Poorhouse Press ;, 1985.

Ellis, Warren(w) and Brian Hitch(a). *Authority Volume 1*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Dc Comics, 2014.

Englehart, Steve(w), and Don Heck(a). *Giant-Size Avengers* Volume 1 #4. Marvel Comics, June 1975.

Englehart, Steve(w), and Richard Howell(a). "Ancestors" *Vision and the Scarlet Witch* Volume 2 #3. Marvel Comics, December 1985.

Ennis, Garth(w), and Lewis Larosa(a). *Punisher* Volume 6 #1. Marvel Comics, 2004.

Fan, Hong. *Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom: The Liberation of Women's Bodies in Modern China*. London: F. Cass, 1997.

Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Rev. ed. New York: Stein and Day, 1966.

Finger, Bill(w), and Bob Kane(a). *Batman* Volume 1 #1. DC Comics [National Comics], Spring 1940.

Finger, Bill(w), and Sheldon Moldoff(a). *Batman* Volume 1 #122. DC Comics, March 1959.

Fletcher, Brandon(w), and Cameron Stewart(w)(a), and Babs Tarr(a). *Batgirl* Volume 4 #37. DC Comics, February 2015.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Fraction, Matt(w), and David Aja(a). *Hawkeye* Volume 2 #6. Marvel Comics, February 2013.

Fraction, Matt(w), and David Aja(a). *Hawkeye* Volume 2 #7. Marvel Comics, March 2013.

Fraction, Matt(w), and David Aja(a). *Hawkeye* Volume 2 #11. Marvel Comics, August 2013.

Fraction, Matt(w), and Salvador Larroca(a). *Invincible Iron Man* Volume 1 #527. Marvel Comics, December 2012.

Fraction, Matt(w), and Salvador Larroca(a). *Invincible Iron Man* Volume 2 #11. Marvel Comics, May 2009.

Gaiman, Neil(w), and Dave McKean(a). *Black Orchid*. New York: DC Comics, 1991.

Gaiman, Neil(w), and Mark Buckingham(a). “Pavane.” *Secret Origins* Volume 2 #36. DC Comics, January 1989.

Gale, Bob(w), and Alex Maleev(a). *Batman* Volume 1 #563. DC Comics, March 1999.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. New Haven u.a.: Yale Univ. Press, 1984.

Glass, Adam(w), and Fernando Dagnino(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 4 #15. DC Comics, February 2013.

Glass, Adam(w), and Federico Dalacchio(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 4 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Glass, Adam(w), and Clayton Henry(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 4 #6. DC Comics, April 2012.

Glass, Adam(w), and Clayton Henry(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 4 #7. DC Comics, May 2012.

Goff, Jon(w), and Szymon Kudranski(a). *Spawn* #228. Image Comics, February 2013.

Gray, Justin, Jimmy Palmiotti(w) and Amanda Conner(a). *Power Girl* Volume 2 #2. DC Comics August 2009.

Gravett, Paul. *Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life*. London: Aurum, 2005.

"Great Power, Great Responsibility." In *Superheroes a Never-Ending Battle*. PBS. October 15, 2015.

Greimas, Algirdas Julien. *Essais De Sémiotique Poétique: Avec Des Études Sur Apollinaire, Bataille, Baudelaire, Hugo, Jarry, Mallarmé, Michaux, Nerval, Rimbaud, Roubaud*. Paris: Larousse, 1972.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Groneman, Carol. "Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*: 337.

Hajdu, David. *The Ten-cent Plague: The Great Comic-book Scare and How It Changed America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Hall, Stuart. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham [England: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973.

Hamilton, Edmond(w), and Sheldon Moldoff(a). *Detective Comics* Volume 1 #233. DC Comics, July 1956.

Hanley, Tim. *Wonder Woman Unbound the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014.

Harris, Cheryl. *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1998.

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics an Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983.

Heer, Jeet. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Hickey, Walt. "Comic Books Are Still Made By Men, For Men And About Men." FiveThirtyEight. October 13, 2014. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Hinkley, Dave. "PBS Announces 'Superheroes: The Never Ending Battle'" NY Daily News. August 8, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Hodge, Bob, and Gunther R. Kress. *Social Semiotics*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Hodge, Bob. *Literature as Discourse: Textual Strategies in English and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

Horrocks, Dylan. "Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud's Definition of Comics." *The Comics Journal*, June 1, 2001.

Howe, Sean. *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. New York: Harper, 2012.

Hudlin, Reginald(w), and Scott Eaton(a). *Black Panther* Volume 4 #10. Marvel Comics, January 2006.

Hudlin, Reginald(w), and Scott Eaton(a). *Black Panther* Volume 4 #14. Marvel Comics, May 2006.

Hudlin, Reginald(w), and Scott Eaton(a). *Black Panther* Volume 4 #15. Marvel Comics, June 2006.

Hudlin, Reginald(w), and Scott Eaton(a). *Black Panther* Volume 4 #17. Marvel Comics, August 2006.

Hudlin, Reginald(w), and Manuel Garcia(a). *Black Panther* Volume 4 #21. Marvel Comics, December 2006.

Hudson, Laura. "Kelly Sue Deconnick on the Evolution of Carol Danvers to Captain Marvel [Interview]." Comics Alliance. March 19, 2012. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Dave Gibbons(a). *Green Lantern: The Sinestro Corps War*. New York: DC Comics, 2011.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Phil Jimenez and George Perez(a). *Infinite Crisis* #3. DC Comics, February 2006.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Scott Kolins(a). *Final Crisis: Rogues' Revenge* #1. DC Comics, December 2008.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Doug Mahnke(a). *Green Lantern*.Volume 5 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Ivan Reis(a). *Blackest Night*. New York: DC Comics, 2010.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Ivan Reis(a). *Aquaman*.Volume 7 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Peter Tomasi(a). *Brightest Day Vol. 1*. New York: DC Comics, 2010.

Johns, Geoff(w), and Ethan Van Sciver(a). *Green Lantern: Rebirth* #1. DC Comics, December 2004.

Johns, Geoff and Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, Mark Waid(w), and Keith giffen, Tom Derenick, Joe Prado(a). *52* #33. DC Comics, December 20, 2006.

Johnston, Rich. "DC Comics Smashes Marvel On Marketshare In September, But Wolverine's Death Tops The Chart - Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News." Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News. October 3, 2014. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Johnston, Rich. "Image Comics' October Marketshare Jumps To 12.28% - Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News." Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News. November 5, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Johnston, Rich. "J Scott Campbell And Wonder Woman's New Shoulder Pads - Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News." Bleeding Cool Comic Book, Movie, TV News. March 15, 2015. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Kanigher, Robert(w), and Harry G. Peter(a). *Sensation Comics* Volume 1 #94. DC Comics, October 1949.

Karasik, Paul, and David Mazzucchelli. *City of Glass*. New York: Picador/Henry Holt, 2004.

Kavanagh, Barry. "Blather: The Alan Moore Interview." Blather: The Alan Moore Interview. Accessed September 8, 2015.

Kindt, Matt(w), and Niel Googe(a). *Detective Comics* Volume 2 #23.2. DC Comics, November 2013.

Kirby, Jack and Joe Simon. *Captain America Comics* #1. Timely Comics, 1941

Kraft, David Anthony.(w), and Mike Vosburg(a). *The Savage She-Hulk* Volume 1 #6. Marvel Comics, July 1980.

Krum, Randy. "Evolution of the Batman Logo." Evolution of the Batman Logo - Blog About Infographics and Data Visualization - Cool Infographics. 24 Dec. 2012. Web. 20 Sept. 2015.

Larsen, Erik and Keith Giffen(w), and Victor Bridges(a). *Freak Force* #6. Image Comics, June 1994.

Lean, Rob. "44 Upcoming Comic Book TV Shows, and When to Expect Them." *Den of Geek*. August 20, 2015. Accessed September 27, 2015.

Lee, Stan(w), and John Buscema(a). *The Savage She-Hulk* Volume 1 #1. Marvel Comics, February 1980.

Lee, Stan(w), and Steve Ditko(a). “Spider-Man!” *Amazing Fantasy* Volume 1 #15. Marvel Comics, August 1962.

Lee, Stan(w), and Jack Kirby(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #16. Marvel Comics, May 1965.

Lee, Stan(w), and Jack Kirby(a). *Fantastic Four* Volume 1 #50. Marvel Comics, May 1966.

Lee, Stan(w), and Jack Kirby(a). *The Incredible Hulk* Volume 1 #1. Marvel Comics, May 1962.

Lee, Stan(w), and Jack Kirby(a). *X-Men* Volume 1 #1. Marvel Comics, September 1963.

Lee, Stan(w), and Jack Kirby(a). *X-Men* Volume 1 #4. Marvel Comics, March 1964.

Lee, Stan(w), and John Romita(a). *Amazing Spider-Man* Volume 1 #50. Marvel Comics, July 1967.

Lehman, Peter. *Pornography: Film and Culture*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Levitz, Paul. *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking*. Köln: Taschen, 2010.

Levitz, Paul(w), and George Perez and Kevin Maguire(a). *Worlds' Finest* Volume 5 #1. DC Comics, July 2012.

Levitz, Paul(w), and Kevin Maguire, geraldo Borges, Robson Rocha et. al(a). *Worlds' Finest* Volume 5 #12. DC Comics, July 2013.

Liu, Marjorie(w), and Mike Perkins(a). *Astonishing X-Men* Volume 3 #51. Marvel Comics, August 2012.

Lobdell, Scott(w), and Richard Bennett(a). *X-Men Unlimited* Volume 1 #4. Marvel Comics, March 1994.

Lobdell, Scott(w), and Brandon Peterson(a). *Uncanny X-Men* Volume 1 #297. Marvel Comics, February 1993.

Lobdell, Scott(w), and Kenneth Rocafort(a). *Red Hood and the Outlaws* #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Loeb, Jeph(w), and Jim Lee(a). *Hush*. New York: DC Comics, 2009.

MacDonald, Heidi. "DC's Rood Breaks Down Reader Survey." PublishersWeekly.com. February 14, 2012. Accessed September 19, 2015.

MacDonald, Heidi. "Breaking News: The Comics Industry Is Not Dying." The Beat. June 12, 2013. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Madrid, Mike. *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*. Ashland, Or.: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009.

Magnussen, Anne. *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000.

Marston, William Moulton(w), and H. G. Peter(A). *The Wonder Woman Chronicles*. New York, NY: DC Comics, 2010.

Marston, William Moulton(w), and Harry G. Peter(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 1 #5. DC Comics, July 1943.

Marvel's The Avengers. Dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Scarlett Johansson. Marvel : 2012.

Marz, Ron(w), and Darryl Banks(a). *Green Lantern* Volume 3 #54. DC Comics, August 1994.

Marz, Ron(w), and Sami Basri(a). *Voodoo* Volume 2 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

McCloud, Scott. "The Visual Magic of Comics." Ted Talks. February 1, 2005. Accessed September 19, 2015.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*. New York: Perennial, 2000.

McLaughlin, Jeff. *Comics as Philosophy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Meskin, Aaron. *The Art of Comics a Philosophical Approach*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Messner-Loebs, William(w), and Mike Deodato Jr.(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 2 #91. DC Comics, November 1994.

Messner-Loebs, William(w), and Mike Deodato Jr.(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 2 #92. DC Comics, December 1994.

Messner-Loebs, William(w), and Mike Deodato Jr.(a). *Wonder Woman* Volume 2 #93. DC Comics, January 1995.

Michelinie, David(w), and Todd McFarlane(a). *The Amazing Spider-Man* Volume 1 #306. Marvel Comics, October 1988.

Miller, Frank(w), and David Mazzucchelli(a). *Batman: Year One*. New York: DC Comics, 2005.

Miller, Mark(w), and Steve McNiven(a). *Civil War* Volume 1 #2. Marvel Comics, August 2006.

Mince-Didier, Ave. "Gay Panic Defense | Criminal Law." CriminalDefenseLawyer.com. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Moench, Doug(w), and Jim Aparo(a). *Batman* Volume 1 #500. DC Comics, October 1993.

Molloy, Parker. "California Becomes First State to Ban Gay, Trans 'Panic' Defenses | Advocate.com." Advocate.com. September 29, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Moore, Alan(w), and Dave Gibbons(a). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1987.

Moore, Alan(w), and Brian Bolland(a). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. Deluxe ed. New York: DC Comics, 2008.

Morris, Thomas V. *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*. Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2005.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Chris Burnham(a). *Batman Incorporated* Volume 1 #4. DC Comics, April 2011.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Chris Burnham(a). *Batman Incorporated* Volume 2 #13. DC Comics, September 2013.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Chris Burnham and Cameron Stewart(a). *Batman Incorporated: Leviathan Strikes!* #1. DC Comics, February 2012.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Phil Jimenez(a). *New X-Men* #150. Marvel Comics, February 2006.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Rags Morales(a). *Action Comics* Volume 2 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Morrison, Grant(w), and Frank Quitely(a). *All-star Superman*. New York: DC Comics, 2011.

Nicieza, Fabian(w), and Andy Kubert(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #20. Marvel Comics, May 1993.

Nicieza, Fabian(w), and Andy Kubert(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #22. Marvel Comics, July 1993.

Nicieza, Fabian(w), and Andy Kubert(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #24. Marvel Comics, September 1993.

Nicieza, Fabian(w), and Andy Kubert(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #32. Marvel Comics, May 1994.

Nicieza, Fabian(w), and Brandon Peterson(a). *X-Men* Volume 2 #21. Marvel Comics, June 1993.

Nocenti, Ann(w), and Adriana Melo(a). *Catwoman* Volume 4 #0. DC Comics, November 2012.

Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Oklopčić, Biliana. "Southern Bellehood (De)constructed: A Case Study of Blanche Dubois." Americana. 2008. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Ostrander, John(w), and Luke McDonnell(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #1. DC Comics, May 1987.

Ostrander, John(w), and Luke McDonnell(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #8. DC Comics, December 1987.

Ostrander, John(w), and Luke McDonnell(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #10. DC Comics, February 1988.

Ostrander, John and Kim Yale(w), and Steve Lightle(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #48. DC Comics, December 1990.

Ostrander, John and Kim Yale(w), and Luke McDonnell(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #23. DC Comics, January 1989.

Ostrander, John and Kim Yale(w), and Luke McDonnell(a). *Suicide Squad* Volume 1 #49. DC Comics, January 1991.

Polo, Susana. "DiDio Attempts to Explain DC’s Marriage Ban." The Mary Sue. September 12, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Prasso, Sheridan. *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

Prowse-Gany, Brian. "Rise of the Female Superhero." Yahoo News. August 12, 2015. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Pulido, Brian(w), and Steven Hughes(a). *Lady Death* #0. Chaos Comics, November 1997.

Reid, Darren. "Wonder Woman: The Making of a Feminist Superhero." American History and Culture. May 27, 2014. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Remender, Rick(w), and Daniel Acuna(a). *Uncanny Avengers* Volume 1 #7. Marvel Comics, June 2013.

Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Roberts, Diane. *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.

Rogers, Vaneta. "Winick Returns to Gotham for Sexy, Violent DCnU Catwoman." Newsarama.com. June 11, 2011. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Rogers, Vaneta. "Lois & Clark 'Never Likely to Date in New 52,'" Newsarama.com. August 22, 2012. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Rucka, Greg(w), and Frank Teran(a). *Detective Comics* Volume 1 #732. DC Comics, May 1999.

Rucka, Greg(w), and J. H. Williams(a). *Batwoman: Elegy*. Deluxe ed. New York: DC Comics, 2010.

Ryan, Sean(w), and Tom Derenick and Jeremy Roberts(a). *New Suicide Squad* #3. DC Comics, December 2014.

Saussure, Ferdinand De. *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Charles Bally. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986.

Scalera, Buddy. "The Last Days of CHAOS! An Interview with Brian Pulido." Comics Bulletin. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Schenker, Brett. "Facebook Fandom Spotlight: Who Are the Comic Fans?" Graphic Policy. September 1, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Sekowsky, Mike. *Adventure Comics* #397. DC Comics, September 1970.

Shooter, Jim(w), and Mike Zeck(a). *Secret Wars*. 3rd ed. New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2011.

Shooter, Jim and Steven Grant(w), and Greg LaRocque(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #222. Marvel Comics, August 1982.

Siegel, Jerry(w), and Joe Shuster(a). “Superman, Champion of the Oppressed.” *Action Comics* Volume 1 #1. DC Comics, June 1938.

Simone, Gail. "Women in Refrigerators." Women in Refrigerators. March 1, 1999. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Simone, Gail(w), and Rond Adrian(a). *Birds of Prey* Volume 1 #69. DC Comics, November 2004.

Simone, Gail(w), and Joe Bennett(a). *Birds of Prey* Volume 1 #83. DC Comics, August 2005.

Simone, Gail(w), and Jim Calafiore(a). *Secret Six* Volume 3 #26. DC Comics, December 2010.

Slot, Dan(w), and Rick Burchett(a). *She-Hulk* Volume 2 #17. DC Comics, May 2007.

Snyder, Scott(w), and Greg Capullo(a). *Batman* Volume 2 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Snyder, Scott(w), and Greg Capullo(a). *Batman* Volume 2 #41. DC Comics, August 2015.

Stephenson, Eric. "Eric Stephenson's Keynote From The San Diego Image Expo." Comics Alliance. July 25, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Stephenson, Eric(w), Chap Yaep(a), and Rob Liefeld(w)(a). *Team Youngblood* #9. Image Comics, May 1994.

Stevenson, Noelle. "How to Fix Every Strong Female Character Pose." How Are You I'm Fine Thanks. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Storer, Horatio R. "Cases of Nymphomania." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 1856, 378-86.

Straczynski, J. Michael(w), and Joe Quesada(a). *The Amazing Spider-Man: One More Day*. Direct ed. New York: Marvel, 2008.

Stracynski, J. Michael(w), and Ron Garney(a). *The Amazing Spider-Man* Volume 1 #529. Marvel Comics, April 2006.

Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please a History of the Victorian Corset*. Oxford: Berg, 2001.

Taylor, Aaron. ""He's Gotta Be Strong, And He's Gotta Be Fast, And He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life": Investigating The Engendered Superhero Body." *The Journal of Popular Culture*: 344-60.

"The Visual Magic of Comics." Scott McCloud:. February 1, 2005. Accessed September 15, 2015.

Thom, Mary. Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement. New York: H. Holt, 1997.

Thomas, Roy(w), and Sal Buscema(a). *Avengers* Volume 1 #68. Marvel Comics, September 1969.

Tomasi, Peter J.(w), and Patrick Gleason(a). *Batman and Robin* Volume 2 #25. DC Comics, January 2014.

Tomasi, Peter J.(w), and Patrick Gleason(a). *Green Lantern Corps* Volume 2 #46. DC Comics, May 2010.

Waid, Mark(w), and Howard Porter(a). *Tower of Babel*. London: Titan, 2001.

Walton, John Tompkins. "Case of Nymphomania Successfully Treated." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 1857, 47-49.

Ware, Chris. *ACME Novelty Library #19*. Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1987.

Wein, Len(w), and Dave Cockrum(a). *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. Marvel Comics, May 1975.

Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York [u.a.: Rinehart, 1954.

Wheeler, Andrew. "'Batgirl' #37 Criticized For Transphobia; Creators Apologize." Comics Alliance. December 15, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015.

Willingham, Bill(w), and Damion Scott(a). *Robin* Volume 2 #128. DC Comics, September 2004

Wilson, Nathan. "Paul Levitz Talks About 75 Years of DC Comics." The Comics Journal. December 10, 2010. Accessed September 19, 2015.

Winick, Judd(w), and Guillem March(a). *Catwoman* Volume 4 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Wohl, David(w), and Michael Turner(a). *Witchblade* #1. Image Comics, November 1995.

Wohl, David(w), and Michael Turner(a). *Witchblade* #3. Image Comics, March 1996.

Judd, Winick(w), and Guillem March(a). *Catwoman* Volume 4 #1. DC Comics, November 2011.

Wolf, Naomi. *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood*. New York: Random House, 1997.

Wolfman, Marv(w), and George Perez(w)(a). *New Teen Titans* Volume 1 #1. DC Comics, November 1980.

Wolfman, Marv(w), and George Perez(a). *New Teen Titans* Volume 1 #16. DC Comics, February 1982.

Wolfman, Marv. *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. New York: DC Comics, 2001.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

Wood, Brian(w), and David Lopez(a). *X-Men* Volume 3 #32. Marvel Comics, September 2012.

Wood, Susan. *The Poison Maiden & the Great Bitch: Female Stereotypes in Marvel Superhero Comics*. San Bernardino, Calif.: R. Reginald/Borgo Press, 1989.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.

Wykes, Maggie, and Barrie Gunter. *The Media and Body Image If Looks Could Kill*. London: SAGE, 2005.

Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience "Throwing like a Girl" and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Z, Christina(w), and Michael Turner(a). *Witchblade* #8. Image Comics, August 1996.