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Superhero comics and the Digital Communications Circuit: a case study of *Strong Female Protagonist*

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Superhero Comics and the Digital Communications Circuit: a case study of *Strong Female Protagonist*

Abstract: This article examines the ongoing superhero webcomic *Strong Female Protagonist* (2012-present), by Brannon Lee Mulligan and Molly Ostertag and employs it as a case study to analyse the new communications circuit created by the digital production and delivery of comics. It adopts a perspective drawn from Book History to frame the communication model of print comics and to evaluate how webcomics such as *Strong Female Protagonist* redefine the role of readers, authors and publishers.

Keywords: webcomics; *Strong Female Protagonist*; superheroes; history of the book; history of reading

Superhero Comics and the Digital Communications Circuit: a case study of *Strong Female Protagonist*

Introduction

The current rise of digital channels for the production, circulation and reading of comics is opening new publishing avenues for comic creators who want to operate beyond the confines of the established print publication system, by exploiting ‘the opportunities offered by technological change and digital culture’ (Johnston 2015, 10). However, the superhero genre, which is the staple of the two ‘majors’ Marvel and DC, seems to have been embraced only reluctantly by webcomic authors, who often employ the creative freedom of self-publication to explore niche genres or experiment with designs that challenge the traditional affordances of print, be they an ‘infinite canvas’ (McCloud 2000, 222) or ‘hypercomics’ (Goodbrey 2017, 87–88).

This article will examine an ongoing superhero webcomic, Brannon Lee Mulligan and Molly Ostertag's *Strong Female Protagonist* (2012-present; from now on abbreviated to *SFP*) and employ as a case study to debate how the new communications circuit created by the digital production and delivery of comics is rewriting the role of comic readers, authors and publishers.

SFP in brief

Webcomics are comics 'originally meant to be distributed and read on digital platforms online using an Internet browser' (Priego 2011, 229). *SFP* is an ongoing webcomic published twice weekly. It was created in 2012 by writer Brennan Lee Mulligan and artist Molly Ostertag, a recent graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York. The website describes *SFP* thus: '*SFP* follows the adventures of a young middle-class American with super-strength, invincibility and a crippling sense of social injustice' (Mulligan and Ostertag 2017).

The basic narrative premise of *SFP* represents an inversion of the by-now stereotypical young superhero origin stories, as typified for example by Marvel's *Spider-Man* or the more recent *Ms Marvel*, whose protagonists, Peter Parker and Kamala Khan, both struggle to reconcile the sudden acquisition of superpowers with the insecurities and anxieties of a teenager (Wright 2003, 210). *SFP* is predicated on the opposite paradigm, as it follows the adventures of Alison Green, a former teenage superhero known as Mega Girl, while she tries to adapt to life as a university student after voluntarily shedding her superhero persona. From the title itself, *SFP* sets out to challenge many of

the narrative and publishing assumptions of the superhero genre through the affordances of the webcomics medium.

Darnton's communication circuit and the production of comics

In a seminal 1982 article, Robert Darnton outlined a general model for the production and reception of printed books, which he modelled as 'a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher ... the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader' (Darnton 1982, 69). The strongest relationship is implied to be that between author and publisher, though Darnton also acknowledges the pervasive influence of the reader both before and after the publication of a book. Darnton explains in particular how authors shape their work addressing 'implicit readers', hearing from 'explicit reviewers', responding to criticism of their previous works or anticipating readers' expectations in future works (1982, 67). At the same time, Darnton admits that, of all the steps in the communications circuit, reading is the most likely to elude the scholar (1982, 79). Darnton argues that his model, which is based on his study of 18th-century France, is applicable with small adjustments to printed books from any period or location (1982, 67).

The traditional production process of US superhero comics can indeed be plotted against Darnton's circuit, though certain agents have greater weight in the so-called 'direct sales' or 'direct market' system that has dominated comics publishing for the last 40 years or more (Sabin 1993, 66). While in Darnton's model the author is the prime mover of the communications circuit, in the (superhero) comics circuit, ultimate authority over what can be represented and discussed in the majority of superhero titles resides instead with a specialised function of the publisher, the editors, who act as

mediators between the creation, production, marketing and reception of comics (Friedlander 2017, 5). The publisher interests represented by the editors not infrequently clash with issues of authorial control (Comic Shenanigans 2015, quoted in Cocca 2016, 153). Of the other agents in Darnton's circuit, the 'Shippers' category can be mapped onto the distribution company Diamond Comics, which has a virtual monopoly on the supply of comics to the network of specialist comic stores that represent Darnton's 'Booksellers' (1982, 77). The readers who purchase comic books through these channels then complete the circuit.

The apparent ease with which Darnton's book production model can be superimposed upon that of superhero comics hides however significant differences. Even within print production, the balance of power is not spread evenly among all agents (St Clair 2004, 44). In the superhero comics circuit, it is essential to note that the copyright of the best-known characters resides not with their creators but with the publishers (Sabin 1993, 32). Writers and artists who work for even the most prominent Marvel and DC series are therefore little more than work-for-hire who rarely remain invested in a single series for long (Griep 2017a, para. 2). This position of the author as subcontractor in itself has some precedents in the Early Modern book market (St Clair 2004, 41), though during the 18th and 19th centuries, copyright was gradually invested in the author as well. A further contributor to the imbalance in the comics circuit is the lack of multiplicity and competition in several key areas. Where Darnton discusses, for example, authors and booksellers choosing between multiple publishers or supply routes (1982, 71), the specialist comic stores have no choice but to order through a single distribution company on a non-returnable basis. Collected editions of the most successful comic titles may also be distributed as trade paperbacks through regular

bookshops, but comic stores remain the only outlet for purchasers of monthly issues of ongoing series, known as ‘pamphlets’ or ‘floppies’ in comic creator parlance (MacDonald 2017a).

As William St Clair explained for Romantic-period books, links can be established between the mentalities of readers and the economics of book production (2004, 437), and especially between intellectual property regimes and access to reading (2004, 443). The de-facto monopolies and the copyright restrictions embedded within the comics communication circuit privilege certain types of readers over others. The pre-order system operated by the distributors is essentially a subscription model (St Clair 2004, 166), with the comics store, not the reader, as the customer (Hatfield 2005, 22). This means that comic store owners, not unlike the 18th-century bookseller Rigaud studied by Darnton (1982, 69–70), need to evaluate carefully whether to stock new, untested titles or risk making significant financial losses in the shape of unsold, unreturnable comics. These strictures on distribution result therefore in a focus on established, publisher-owned titles with safe returns, based on their appeal to a reader audience that is still to this day heavily male-dominated (Cocca 2016, 11). The recent appearance of other media, such as films and computer games, within the comics communications circuit has introduced a further agent, the publishers’ parent companies (Marvel Comics is owned by Disney, DC Comics by Warner Brothers), who increasingly view superhero comics as material for other lucrative ventures. In the words of Karen Berger, former editor of the Vertigo imprint for DC Comics, both DC and Marvel could now be described as ‘superhero companies owned by movie studios’ (as quoted in Itzkoff 2013). The comics market is however changing rapidly, with superhero titles no longer achieving the kind of dominance they enjoyed even just a couple of decades ago

(McCloud 2000, 111).

Digital comics and their affordances: formal

Darnton's communications circuit is specifically aimed at modelling the lifecycle of print books. The growing importance of the digital medium, which cuts across all aspects of comics production and reception, is creating however a parallel digital communications circuit, which involves agents that often set themselves as an alternative to the print comics circuit (Johnston 2015, 3). While superhero publishers have also begun to make their comics available through digital delivery platforms, such as for example Marvel Unlimited and Comixology (Goodbrey 2017, 66), the new all-digital format of webcomics has been embraced primarily by authors working in other comic genres.

Webcomics are a field in constant evolution, but one that by now occupies a consolidated place within the comics medium. The highest honours in the comic world, the Ignatz, Eisner and Harvey Awards, all began to award a prize for Best Digital Comic from the period 2002-2005 (Lopes 2009, 176). Certain webcomics have enjoyed sufficient commercial success to enable their authors to work as full-time web-cartoonists, such as for example John Allison's *Scary Go Round* (2002-2009) Scott Kurz's *PvP Online*, (1998-ongoing), and Rich Burlew's *Order of the Stick* (2003-ongoing). The last two titles revolve around the apparently niche subject of roleplaying games (though *PvP* also includes videogames), topics that would probably not have found much favour with most commercial comics publishers. Yet *Order of the Stick* was the first creative project to raise over \$1 million on the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter (Flood 2012), proving that free distribution online is not necessarily a

barrier to commercial viability in the webcomics communications circuit.

SFP and the digital medium

The relationship of webcomics to print comics and their potential for innovation within the comics medium are a topic of extensive debate. From a formal perspective, webcomics can allow authors to escape many of the restrictions of the print comic (Priego 2011, 268), such as for example their predominantly vertical layout. This is especially true of the standard 24-page, 12-issues-a-year serial ‘floppy’ comic, which in addition imposes a grueling monthly schedule on many authors. Webcomics offer instead expanded creative opportunities such as the experimentation with ‘plastic’ layouts (Gazzard and Goodbrey 2014), or McCloud’s ‘infinite canvas’ (McCloud 2000, 200).

The authors of *SFP* exploit the transformative potential of webcomics in relation to genre and readership, as will be discussed later, but from a formal point of view, they publish one comic book page per instalment, twice a week, complete with conventional page borders and panels. This is not in itself an unusual stance for webcomics (Goodbrey 2017, 66), which frequently are happy to reproduce the vertical layout of the print page. This choice is due to more than simply creative inertia. In comics, the page is indeed a unit of meaning, not simply a layout element but a ‘total design unit’ that can be read ‘in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion’ as an ‘unbroken surface’ (Hatfield 2009, 139–40). The format of comics is indeed a signifier in itself (Hatfield 2009, 144). Interviews released by the *SFP* authors confirm that the format they employ is the result of conscious artistic and narrative choice. Ostertag worked on experimental comics as part of her degree from the School of Visual Arts, and opted to break away

from them in her webcomic production in order to emphasise the complex story she was developing with Mulligan (Rivera 2014). In her graduation speech in 2014, Ostertag declared her awareness of the transformative role of the digital and its challenge to the comics communications circuit: 'Traditional, established gatekeepers are being undermined by the fact that technology lets nearly anyone make art. You can find an audience for your work in a way that's never been possible before' ('Meet Molly Ostertag: Cartoonist, SVA Grad, 2014 Commencement Speaker' 2014).

Recent studies suggest that Mulligan and Ostertag's choice of combining an intricate storyline with an established comics layout may have justifications beyond simple authorial preference. Experiments have shown that webcomics that challenge the structure of the comics page, for example by providing a panel-by-panel reading experience, seem to impede both reading comprehension and reader immersion, as readers struggle to construct 'a structural relationship between the page and panels, and between the panels themselves' (Hou, Rashid, and Lee 2017, 92). There may also be a technological barrier to the adoption of experimental layouts because of the need for specialised programming knowledge or specialist software, such as Goodbrey's *Tarquin Engine* or Müller's *Infinite Canvas* (Goodbrey 2017, 95–96). At the moment, however, digital comics are still working to develop a format that can fully challenge the printed page or a structure that approaches its effectiveness as a means for conveying complex meanings. Improvements in this area, both through technical changes and through reader education, are of course likely, and indeed ongoing experimentation makes panel delivery a fast-developing area in webcomics (see for example the analysis of Mark Waid and Peter Krause's *Insufferable* in Goodbrey 2017, 68–69), though one where the authors of *SFP* have decided not to play a role at the moment.

Digital comics and their affordances for readers: From social computing to social web(comic)

If formally *SFP* does not take significant advantage of the innovatory potential of webcomics, it is instead a full participant in the most significant transformation they are enabling: the development of a parallel digital comics circuit, which challenges and innovates that of print comics. Webcomics can be seen as an embodiment of Alan Liu's theory of 'social computing', which he defines as 'the hallmark of Web 2.0' (2013, para. 13). Proponents of the 'social text', such as D.F. McKenzie and Jerome McGann, argued in the past that books are 'social objects' that are 'fashioned and refashioned repeatedly' by readers (McGann 2006, para. 36-37) and called for the acknowledgement of the great autonomy of readers, who 'inevitably make their own meanings' within the communications circuit (McKenzie 1999, 19). Liu observes that the new digital technologies of blogs, wikis and social media enable readers to go further than the boundaries of private interpretation allowed them by print. Digital readers are allowed instead to make their comments publicly, on the same page with the authorial text. Readers do thus, according to Liu, 'become coauthors', short-circuiting one of the fundamental distinctions of the print communications circle (2013, para. 11).

In webcomics, this process of co-authorship is located chiefly within the comments section, usually situated at the bottom of the authorial text. Comics have 'long been a participatory culture' (Burke 2015, 167), where fan mail pages play a significant role, which the Comic Book Readership Archive project is currently investigating together with fanzines and other fan- or publisher-led publications ('CoBRA | Comic Book

Readership Archive' n.d.). However, print fan mail pages allow communication only between readers and authors, or more frequently, editors. While authors often attend conventions, interaction is limited to those readers who can afford to physically travel. The digital social text instead permits readers to address authors independently of their physical location, in close temporal proximity to the date of publication (instead of the weeks or months needed for print), with greatly reduced editorial intermediation and filtering, and, crucially, in close physical juxtaposition to the authorial text. While this may not amount to the same level of co-authorship available on a wiki page, where readers can directly alter authorial texts, the comment section of a webcomic such as *SFP* should be considered an integral part of the reading experience (Priego 2011, 229). Crucially, comments also facilitate reader-to-reader communication, allowing for the enactment of practices of 'community reading' (Bérubé et al. 2010, 422). These were once the norm in reading history, but became increasingly rare with the advent of silent reading. The comment section of *SFP* thus allows geographically dispersed readers to engage in debate and form the sense of being part of a larger 'imagined community' of 'fellow-readers' connected not by print, as for Anderson's early modern national communities, but by digital threads (Anderson 2006, 44). This is fundamental for comics, which still lack cultural cachet overall and are still stigmatised as a 'fandom' rather than an acceptable form of reading (Orme 2016, 407). The social text created through social computing practices allows comic readers to go beyond a generic awareness of imagined fellow readers, enabling actual contact and exchange, albeit mediated by the digital medium and the asynchronous nature of online forums. Occasionally, these online communities of reading even acquire physical manifestations. For example, the readers of Marvel's *Captain Marvel* have organised themselves into the so-called 'Carol Corps' (from the character's alter ego, Carol

Danvers), stimulated by *Captain Marvel* author Kelly Sue DeConnick and editor Sana Amanat. They are a visible presence online and at comic conventions, and vocally push for the inclusion of more diverse storylines and characters in superhero comics (Cocca 2016, 19).

SFP uses two platforms to develop this social text: comments at the bottom of each page and the social media presence of the authors, especially of the artist Molly Ostertag. Comments are where the most engaged readers congregate, with numerous pages attracting in excess of 200 comments. Readers discuss each new page at length, going into panel-by-panel analyses, cross-referencing previous issues and other media and launching into heated debates on the development of the current storyline and the overall meaning of *SFP*. The authors seem to have chosen to keep a marginal profile on this platform, limiting themselves to moderating objectionable comments rather than directly intervening in discussions. The comments therefore allow readers to create a community that is not merely a passive assembly of receivers. They offer readers a space in the margins of the authorial text where they can inscribe their words side-by-side with it, therefore informing how subsequent readers perceive a given page or plot event. Indeed, the sheer amount of reader comments far outweighs the authorial text on any given page of *SFP*, with the potential to shape the interpretation of subsequent readers in a significant manner. Comment authors thus acquire the role of co-authors in a way impossible within the print comic communications circuit. They can make a leap from 'implicit readers' to 'explicit reviewers' that would have been unthinkable for Darnton's Enlightenment public.

SFP and Kickstarter

The webcomics communications circuit allows readers even further agency than through the already significant practices of community reading and co-authorship: through crowdfunding campaigns, readers have the chance to become co-producers. The *SFP* team employ the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter to fund the print publication of their comic and the creation of additional materials. The initial campaign in May-June 2014 ('Strong Female Protagonist: Book One' n.d.) and the subsequent one in April-May 2017 ('Strong Female Protagonist: Book Two' n.d.) were backed in each case by about 2,000 people who pledged on both occasions over \$60,000 to print a text they could already consult online for free. No print-based comic book could survive with a readership of only 2,000, however committed. Kickstarter instead permitted the *SFP* authors to quantify and qualify the extent and commitment of their readership and the degree of support they are willing to offer (Rivera 2014). The Kickstarter campaigns therefore opened up further channels of communication between authors and readers. It also enabled the latter to further short-circuit the comics communication circuit, becoming personally invested in *SFP* and part of its success. As is frequent with online crowdfunding campaigns (Guigar 2013, 221), supporters were able to pledge different amounts and receive in exchange increasing levels of rewards, from physical copies of the books to merchandise of various typologies. Mulligan and Ostertag further employed this appeal to allow the audience to breach the fourth wall, as the highest level of reward was the inclusion of the supporter within the pages of the comic book itself, in a tangible embodiment of the readers' role as co-creators. The ten cameos available were all subscribed to within 24 hours of the start of the Kickstarter campaign, to the tune of \$250 each ('Strong Female Protagonist: Book Two' consulted 26 April 2017). The availability of print copies, beyond those sent to Kickstarter subscribers, has also created an additional readership, through channels such as comic stores, bookstores

and libraries. Indeed, the first volume of *SFP* went into a second printing in January 2016 ('Strong Female Protagonist: Book One / Top Shelf Productions' n.d.).

SFP and the female superhero

Critiques of the superhero genre

This transposition of 19th-century subscription publishing within the 21st century has enabled the authors of *SFP* to address the structural elements of the superhero genre in ways that would be extremely difficult within the confines of the print communications circuit.

Superhero narratives have been scrutinized critically by academics at least since Umberto Eco wrote 'The Myth of Superman' in the 1960s. Subsequent developments of the superhero genre led to the first 'superheroes with superproblems' and peaked in the 1980s, through 'revisionist' (Sabin 1993, 87) or 'deconstructive' (Wright 2003, 267) superhero stories created by the likes of Alan Moore (*Watchmen*), Frank Miller (*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*) and Neil Gaiman (*The Sandman*). The late 1990s and early 2000s featured a period of reconstruction following these critiques that featured largely the works of the same Moore (*Promethea*, *Tom Strong*) and of other authors such as Grant Morrison (*Arkham Asylum*, *The Invisibles*) and Warren Ellis (*The Authority*, *Planetary*). Parallel to the rise of these superhero narratives, mainstream superheroes embraced their own form of transmediality through numerous successful film and television adaptations and re-imaginings.

While webcomics have flourished that cover all genres from satire to eroticism and from adventure to personal memoir, the superhero genre has been embraced with some reluctance by webcomics creators (notable exceptions being Mark Waid and Peter

Krause's *Insufferable* and Brad Guigar's parodic *Evil, Inc*). *SFP* sets itself apart from traditional superhero narratives by critiquing their tropes and axioms, but remains short of full-blown 1980s-style deconstruction by paying tacit homage to the superhero tradition. *SFP* however explicitly addresses those large-scale societal issues found so lacking by Eco in superhero narratives (1981, 122–24). Indeed, the strapline for the entire comic revolves around two poles: on the one hand social justice, and on the other, the concept of the 'strong female protagonist', which remains to this day a vexed question in comics. The communications circuit of print superhero comics is directly responsible for this situation. Print superhero comics are mostly written by male authors, drawn by male artists, feature predominantly male protagonists, and are aimed at an audience allegedly composed of male (and white) readers. Indeed, in 2016 only 12 percent of superhero titles starred a female lead, which already represented double the percentage of 2010 (Cocca 2016, 20). As a concrete example, the *Justice League of America* series is DC's leading 'ensemble' or 'team' comic. It comprised in its earliest 1960s incarnation six male superheroes (Superman, Batman, Flash, Aquaman, Martian Manhunter, Green Lantern) and just one female, Wonder Woman (Hanley 2014, 109). Despite the many reboots of the DC Universe, this male-to-female ratio has not changed significantly over the years. Marvel's *Avengers* are just as gender-unbalanced, with a similar five-to-one ratio for example in its recent cinematic incarnation. Single-hero titles headed by women, when they do exist, regularly see lower sales than their male-led counterparts. For example, *Spider-Man* sales hover currently around 50-60,000 copies per month, whereas *Captain Marvel* struggles to break the 20,000 copies mark (Lancel 2017). Publishers such as Marvel and DC have justified their reluctance to embrace more diverse perspectives on gender, race and sexuality with the pressure exercised upon them by the readers in their communications circuit.

These assumption on reader preferences clash with recent studies (2014), which found that women constituted 46% of the 24 million self-declared comic fans on US Facebook profiles (Schenker 2014). Even DC editor Jim Lee has recently observed that up to 40% of DC readers may be female (MacDonald 2017b). Marvel and DC responded to the shifting profile of their readers by creating new female characters or revamping old ones, often with a certain degree of success. For example, the *Ms Marvel* series, which revolves around Pakistani-American teenager Kamala Khan, has featured in the *New York Times* top 10 bestseller list with several of its trade paperbacks and has won several awards (Wilson 2017). Of particular relevance is its success at the Hugo Awards, one of the most prestigious Science Fiction accolades and significantly, one granted not by professional critics but by readers. A possible explanation for these contrasting portrayals of comic book readerships could be linked to the publishing formats examined. Female-led superhero titles such as *Ms Marvel* report higher sales in digital format than in print (Lynskey 2015). There are ongoing indications that the digital and bookstore segment of comics readership is diverging from that of serial comics distributed through specialist comic stores and focuses on a younger, largely female audience (Riesman 2017). Female attendees at comics conventions now equal their male counterparts (Lynskey 2015) and represent a vocal and increasingly active community (Cawley 2017). It is therefore not surprising that *SFP* has chosen a digital medium.

SFP and the body of the female superhero

No topic is perhaps more symbolic of the workings of the traditional communications circuit of superhero comics than the representation of the body of the female hero as it has evolved over decades of interconnected stories. This accumulated stratum of superhero tradition can be summed up in the concept of ‘continuity’, the reading of superhero comics as a gigantic intertext spanning multiple decades (Reynolds 1992, 38). On the one hand, continuity makes superhero comics a rich living example of fundamental concepts explored by 20th-century literary theory, such as canonicity, multiple authorship and intertextuality. On the other hand, this complex history can become a burden that is difficult to significantly impact for any single text or author. Exceptions to this rule do exist. Frank Miller’s run on Marvel’s *Daredevil* in the early 1980s, although quite brief (Miller and Mazzucchelli 1987), went on to radically alter the authorial portrayal and readerly perception of the character for the following decades. Even more significantly, Miller achieved the same drastic reconfiguration of a superhero intertext with his *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), a feat made even more remarkable by the foundational role of the Batman stories within the DC comics intertext.

SFP frequently references superhero continuity. For example, Alison’s Mega Girl costume resembles that of DC’s Super Girl. The looks of the character Paladin are based on Marvel’s Misty Knight, having a bionic left leg instead of a bionic right arm, with her superhero name also being a reference to Knight’s. But *SFP* does not need to adhere to decades of accumulated storylines and conventions, such as those constraining Super Girl or Captain Marvel, which extend beyond the internal consistency to the very appearance of the character. A recent study by Carolyn Cocca attempted to categorise and quantify the portrayal of the female superhero. She found that even in the more

aware comics from the 2010s, direct contemporaries of *SFP*, female superheroes were included in only 26% of panels in the main Marvel and DC team superhero comics. They were represented in a sexually objectifying manner in between 25% and 35% of panels, which constituted a significant improvement compared to the 1990s, when such objectification occurred in over 50% of all panels containing a female superhero (Cocca 2014, 417). “Solo” titles headed by a female superhero, which bear an even closer comparison to *SFP*, objectified the main character in an average of 15% of panels, varying from lows of 6% for Wonder Woman and 5% for Captain Marvel to highs of 25% for Catwoman (Cocca 2014, 419). In *SFP*, this percentage falls close to 0%, a significant departure for the superhero genre. The portrayal of the protagonist is consistently closer to that of the male hero in most comic: a heroic subject rather than an erotic object (Cocca 2016, 16). Alison Green is represented in (very mildly) sexualized poses in no more than five pages (see for example *SFP* 3, 48), usually when she is attempting to initiate sexual contact with other characters, and never simply to gratify the gaze of the (assumed to be male) reader. Indeed, certain male characters are represented in (once again, very mildly) sexualized poses through Alison’s gaze (for example *SFP* 6, 12). Chief among them is rich socialite Max, whose superhero power is the ability to enhance the superpower of others. Interestingly, Mulligan and Ostertag chose to ascribe the typical feminized role of ‘helper’ to a male character, who indeed deeply resents the perceived inferiority of his gift. Alison instead possesses extensive physical powers of invulnerability, super-strength and later, flight, physical attributes more often associated with male heroes. Indeed, the first encounter between Alison and Max reverses recent narratives of female vulnerability and male superhero protectors (Stabile 2009, 87), with Alison rescuing Max from a fire and carrying him (*SFP*, 6, 10-11) in a pose reminiscent of the early Wonder Woman rescuing Steve Trevor (Cocca

2016, 28). Mulligan and Ostertag have also so far eschewed the all-too-conventional plot twist of the loss of power or the loss of control that have been employed for most female heroes, from Wonder Woman to the X-Men's Storm and Jean Grey (Cocca 2016, 127). The latter's fatal loss of control, which is the central plank of the *Dark Phoenix Saga*, seems instead to be ascribed to telepath Patrick, Alison's nemesis as the anti-hero Menace, who is currently (October 2017-April 2018) being portrayed as struggling with self-harm and multiple fractured personalities. The issue of the utility of superheroes (and superhero narratives) in tackling "real-world problems" and the morality of the use of physical force are discussed extensively in several issues, such as for example the lengthy discussions between Alison and a philosophy professor (*SFP* 6, 106-132) and is another trait that distinguishes *SFP* from most mainstream print superhero comics.

SFP constitutes therefore a truly feminist text, unlike other female-led print comics, which have been accused of "faux-feminism" or postfeminism. For example, sections of *Captain Marvel* (Ashfield 2015, 7) have been criticised for their focus on a portrayal of individual success, rather than on the wider societal issues that hamper female self-assertion (though the opposite interpretation of *Captain Marvel* as deeply feminist is put forward in Curtis and Cardo 2017, 9). *SFP* addresses quite overtly the political and social issues of hegemonic patriarchy, especially from Issue 5. When Issue 5 began publication in 2014, the authors posted a "trigger warning" on the *SFP* website and on Ostertag's tumblr site, explaining that they had decided to present a storyline that openly discussed rape and violence against women (though without showing graphic images). Issue 5 focuses therefore on Alison's confrontation with former teammate Mary that revolves around the issue of rape and domestic violence against women, and

whether assisting such victims represents a more legitimate use of their respective superpowers than ultimately sterile fights against super powered criminals. Mary ultimately decides to employ her power of invisibility to execute rapists, while Alison's confrontation with her own moral dilemmas results in the Valkyrie Initiative, a project that matches women at risk of domestic and other abuse with volunteer superhero helpers. Mary's more assertive intervention takes the shape of a single-handed action, aligned to an extent with the ideology of individual empowerment of post-feminism, while Alison's initiative focuses instead on group action and solidarity, and is thus more in tune with more recent feminist ideals (Curtis and Cardo 2017, 10). This attention to the community-building and collective action is reprised in Issue 6 through, for example, an extended depiction of a self-help group for "biodynamic individuals" whose bodies have been morphed beyond conventional human shape and who meet to debate issues of gender, sexuality and societal norms (*SFP*, 6, 57-65). *SFP* also frequently addresses the treatment of sexual orientation, for example, the depiction of the relationship between Alison and ally Feral (*SFP* 3, 10-11) and then between the same-sex couple of Feral and Paladin in Issue 6. The treatment of gender and sexual orientation represents an evolving area in *SFP*, mirroring artist Ostertag's own journey of self-discovery, which culminating in acknowledging her own sexual identity (Ostertag 2016). The importance of social and gender issues to *SFP* was further reinforced by an unusual full-page intervention in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential elections, with both authors reinforcing their commitment, and that of their comic, to civil liberties, diversity and equality (Mulligan and Ostertag 2016, Issue 6).

Conclusion: SFP and the webcomic communications circuit

The state of the print comics communication circuit resembles at the moment the situation of the book publishing world during the Romantic age. Products are marketed towards a limited audience with high spending power, with publishers looking to recoup their investment from relatively high prices, rather than through an expansion of the reading base. St Clair's studies have shown how a progressive reduction in price led to an increase in sales even for titles in the later part of the nineteenth century (St Clair 419).

The increased visibility of superheroes, due primarily to the success of superhero films at the box office has however not translated into higher sales of print comics. Indeed, the steady decline since the 1950s has led comic publishers to rely increasingly on a "core readership" (Burke 2015, 154). The attempts to broaden this audience in a more inclusive direction have been met with resistance from certain print readers. For example, in September 2016, there was a significant fan backlash when Wonder Woman author Greg Rucka declared that the character was "obviously" queer (Hunt 2016). In April 2017, Marvel's vice president of sales stated that their 'diverse' titles were not selling as well as more 'traditional' ones (Griep 2017b), quoting feedback received from some comic store owners. The uncertain future of the comics print communications circuit makes the establishment of a parallel digital circuit, as demonstrated by *SFP* and other titles, more necessary than ever for the development of the comics medium.

[5693 words]

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