

WEAVER, VIRGINIA P. M.A. 'Set the Record Straight': Nonviolence and the Interpretation of Trans Life Writing. (2022)
Directed by Dr. Jennifer Feather. 35 pp.

This paper argues that readers must take a nonviolent approach when interpreting trans life writing. Many past feminists have failed to correctly interpret trans life writing, leading to transphobic conclusions. Based on the writings of Judith Butler, a nonviolent method of interpretation regards both the form and content of trans life writing to be restricted by forces external to the writer, and accounts for these constraints in a more empathetic style of interpretation. Further, this paper makes reference to the concepts of hermeneutic injustice and epistemic exploitation, as outlined by scholars in the field of epistemic injustice, to illuminate its suggestions for methodology.

WEAVER, VIRGINIA P. M.A. Under the Sign of *Gevurah*: Lesbians, Vampires, and Law in *Batwoman*. (2022)
Directed by Dr. Maria Sanchez. 34 pp.

This paper argues that the occasionally explicit Kabbalistic symbolism in Batwoman comics plays a crucial role in illustrating how the DC Comics character of Batwoman stands for, and is restricted by, various forms of law. This paper makes extensive references to histories of Kabbalah as well as primary texts of Jewish mysticism to demonstrate how Batwoman comics are defined by sovereign and psychoanalytic manifestations of the law. In the end, it argues that Batwoman comics also reveal several ways beyond the oppression of the law.

‘SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT’: NONVIOLENCE AND THE INTERPRETATION OF
TRANS LIFE WRITING
AND
UNDER THE SIGN OF *GEVURAH*: LESBIANS, VAMPIRES, AND LAW IN *BATWOMAN*

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The two papers that follow confront very different issues. In the first, “‘Set the Record Straight’: Nonviolence and the Interpretation of Trans Life Writing,” I make an ethical argument. My argument is that a method of reading based on an ethics of nonviolence is essential in interpreting trans memoir and autobiography, and that past transphobic feminists have gone awry in their hermeneutics when confronting these texts. It is a simple argument pursued at length in the hopes of a better future, a normative argument in essence, intent, and form. The theory of nonviolence that I uphold against skeptical readings owes much to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig, Toril Moi, and above all, Judith Butler.

In the second paper, “Under the Sign of *Gevurah*: Lesbians, Vampires, and Law in *Batwoman*,” I take a much different approach to a much different horizon of material. Here, I argue that Kabbalistic symbolism in *Batwoman* comics and those that feature her produce a complex web of connections to manifestations of law, both psychoanalytic and sovereign. In this case, the primary orientation of my intervention is to resist accounts of the character of the new *Batwoman* that simplify her identity to only include being lesbian, neglecting utterly her Judaism. In addition to pointing toward restriction by law, however, I also gesture toward several ways in which the character of *Batwoman* escapes the law, or at least indicates escape routes.

These papers, then, are quite different in some ways, but in others share some common ground. Both are concerned with minority groups and what is popularly called “queer theory.” Both make somewhat ethical points, albeit more implicitly in the latter, which may be read as claiming that intersectionality problematically prioritizes some identities over others in some cases. Regardless, the reader will find that these papers overall take vastly different approaches to vastly different topics.

CHAPTER II: 'SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT': NONVIOLENCE AND THE INTERPRETATION OF TRANS LIFE WRITING

When, in 1979, Janice G. Raymond wrote, “I contend that the problem of transsexualism would be best served by morally mandating it out of existence,” she was not pronouncing a controversial sentiment among the feminists of the time.¹ The transphobia endemic to most of second-wave radical feminism is, by now, common knowledge. However, the reasoning behind this transphobia has remained largely obscure, attributed either to blind hatred or essentialism. I will argue that the primary failure of transphobic feminists regarding the theorization of transsexuality or transgenderism – as most of them term it – is their lack of attention to certain contextual factors behind the production of trans women’s life writing. Their skeptical approach, informed only by political contexts such as patriarchy, neglects the context of precarity behind trans women’s life writings. For radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys, for instance, trans memoirs are ripe with misogyny, exposing trans women’s true perspectives on women and feminism.² Jan Morris’ *Conundrum* is one of her chosen misogynist trans memoirs.³ Indeed, as I will show, Morris’ text does contain misogyny, and not covertly. Following the methodology I will propose, however, this misogyny becomes explicable by a close attention to contextual factors, leading to a nonviolent practice of interpretation, in accordance with Judith Butler’s theory of nonviolence. When we read a trans woman’s autobiographical writings, we must pay abundant attention to the

¹ Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 178.

² Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women’s Press, 1990), 178.

³ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 179.

material exigencies behind their production. Every text is, as I will discuss momentarily, a product of its world, and thus of its author's world. For trans women, this world includes extreme precarity in many arenas, from medical care to social life.

While previous work on narrative and life writing discusses the ethics or epistemology of reading, this essay will shed new light on trans life writing. Most work on ethics in relation to narrative, such as the work of Adam Zachary Newton or J. Hillis Miller, either focuses exclusively on prose fiction or on a variety of genres that does not include life writing.⁴ In its focus on life writing and injustice, this paper comes closest to the work of Leigh Gilmore.⁵ However, Gilmore's work, while feminist, does not focus on trans life writing, nor does it incorporate Butler's theories of nonviolence or precarity, or Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice. This paper thus contributes a new set of perspectives, bringing Judith Butler's most recent work into conversation with trans studies, epistemology, and older radical feminist thought. The making-public of trans life experience is crucial to the dismantling of oppressive sexed systems,⁶ and as I will argue, trans life writing, which plays an essential role in revealing the uncertainties of sex, demands and deserves a style of interpretation that can account for its specificities and explain its sometimes problematic contents.

⁴ Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995); J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

⁵ Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017).

⁶ Ephraim Das Janssen, *Phenomenal Gender: What Transgender Experience Discloses* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2017), 136.

What, ultimately, is the duty of the reader in the act of reading? What are her obligations to the text she encounters? Fundamentally, a book is an object that calls for interpretation – as Emmanuel Levinas writes, books “call for other books.”⁷ Thus, the book solicits some kind of response, some sort of interpretation from the reader, a point corroborated by Jean-Luc Nancy when he writes that a book is always “opening itself liberally to reading, which will never stop opening it wider and deeper, giving it a thousand senses or a thousand secrets, rewriting it, finally, in a thousand ways.”⁸ Additionally, Levinas writes, books “belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords.”⁹ Thus, we can see that books are not in some way isolated text that can be separated from the world, nor do they contain their own entire world; rather, they are inseparably part of the world from which they emerge. The book that calls for interpretation is not itself an island of meaning, but is rather at play with diverse elements of the world surrounding it. In this way, the book calls for an engagement with itself, yes, but also with its world, as the two are inseparable.

Of course, it is impossible – or nearly so – to say that the world of what is written does not include its own author, and it is the author of the text with whom we are faced when we look for a face behind the text. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the act of reading entails a bodily encounter, however slight, between author and reader: “The touch is infinitely indirect, deferred

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1981), 171.

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *On the Commerce of Thinking: Of Books and Bookstores*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 18.

⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 171.

... but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued.”¹⁰ This seems to go against the claims of some previous theorists, perhaps most noteworthy among them Roland Barthes, for whom the author is something of a fictitious transcendental unity of (textual) apperception.¹¹ However, this is not a claim that the author is the sole originator of a unified text, as she is according to the view that Barthes seeks to counter; it is, rather, the claim that a text is a material production with an individual whom we encounter, and whose circumstances influence the writings of their texts. This is well in line with Barthes’ point that there is never a singular writing, as according to this perspective, various forces are involved in the creation of what may appear to be unified texts. We could likely derive much of the point of this argument from Barthes if need be.

Now, for Levinas, discourse is the origin of our relation to the face of the other, which is to say her precariousness.¹² The face is not a literal, visual face; the face, in Levinas’ thought, is in fact the vulnerability of the Other, which is of course in some way bodily, and which simultaneously tempts us to violence and prohibits this violence.¹³ As Judith Butler glosses, for Levinas, the face of the other solicits our ethical response, and to recognize the “meaning” of the face is to recognize the other’s precariousness, which is a general situation of life itself.¹⁴ As

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 51.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 148.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985), 88.

¹³ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020), 134.

living beings, we all share a degree of precariousness in Butler's sense – as things that are affected, that can be mentally and physically harmed, we are vulnerable. However, vulnerability is not shared equally, and here we begin to turn to the status of the trans author under the critic's scrutiny. *Precarity* refers to an unequal distribution of vulnerability that is created to enforce hierarchies.¹⁵ As Butler writes, "The more or less existential conception of 'precariousness' is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity.'"¹⁶

The other whom we face when we face the trans woman memoirist is precisely a precaritized subject, and thus we must be attentive to how we respond to her book's solicitation of a response, enacting a nonviolent mode of interpretation that is attentive to precariousness and precarity. As Butler writes, "[Nonviolence] can be a way of approaching a situation, even living in the world, a daily practice of mindfulness that attends to the precarious character of living beings."¹⁷ If we acknowledge that trans women are in a particularly intense state of precarity – as Butler in fact reminds us – we must also acknowledge that our approach to their memoirs cannot ignore this precarity, and it is this very precarity that lingers just outside the frame of the texts, in their essentially biopolitical contexts in the discourses of gender affirming healthcare and in the context of their authors' social positions and celebrity status.¹⁸ As Jay Prosser argues, trans people's autobiographical output begins not when they put pen to paper, but rather in the

¹⁵ Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015), 12.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 3.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015), 190-191.

¹⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 52-53.

doctor's office when they have to craft a specific type of narrative in order to receive gender affirming healthcare.¹⁹ Of course, then, if the situation that creates trans autobiography is one in which healthcare and other aspects of life are on the line, the trans memoir itself is a document of precarity, subject to medical and other conventions that necessitate contents that are not to be taken as the author's actual vision. Having established this framework, let us turn to trans memoirs, to observe how precarity – physical and social – functions within and without them.

Caroline “Tula” Cossey (hereon either Caroline Cossey or Cossey) demonstrates the material precarity of her situation repeatedly throughout her life writings. Early in her first autobiography, Cossey discusses her time working multiple jobs for scarcely any money as she avoided physical repercussions for her life as – at the time – apparently a gay man. Cossey recounts (in a moment excised from her second autobiography) stealing during her job as a caterer: “To earn more money I also cheated on the sales of ice-cream and soft drinks (everybody did), adding a few extra pennies to the price.”²⁰ Only through, essentially, luck does Cossey acquire the necessary money to receive gender-affirming top surgery.²¹ After living with a wealthy Kuwaiti man for an extended period of time, in the height of luxury, Cossey then returns to the United Kingdom “with less money than we [she'd] arrived [in Kuwait]!”²² She then moves to Rome with only a small “emergency fund” in hand.²³ Regardless of the specifics of these

¹⁹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 101.

²⁰ Caroline “Tula” Cossey, *I am a Woman* (London: Sphere Books Ltd. & Rainbird Publish Group, 1982), 42.

²¹ Cossey, *I am a Woman*, 58.

²² *Ibid*, 106.

²³ *Ibid*, 109.

sometimes humorously-portrayed circumstances, this first autobiography makes abundantly clear a protracted period of time in which Cossey had little if any financial resources due to being trans (or a gay man, according to her early assumptions). She also makes clear the economic precarity of other trans women she encounters, whose poverty is again directly related to their status as trans and thus requiring expensive medical treatment.²⁴

The excision of the mention of stealing from Cossey's second autobiography is an interesting moment in a text the first parts of which are largely copied from its predecessor. While this may have simply been a choice to shorten the text, it seems a conspicuous omission, and I find it beneficial to think through it. Class is a primary site of precarity,²⁵ as may seem obvious, but here, Cossey erases a key and fascinating insight into how she and her coworkers dealt with their economic precarity. The erasure is, perhaps, a way of making the second autobiography more "respectable," as the two texts may serve different purposes, as we shall see later, but regardless, it cannot help but catch the nonviolently-oriented reader's eye as a cautionary moment. When we read trans life writing, we must be attentive to not only what is said, but also to what is unsaid – or at least, what we can determine of what is unsaid. Heedless speculation is no better than sheer obliviousness, but active engagement with holes in the text is essential to the nonviolent reading. We must read outside of the "frame," as Judith Butler might call it. As Butler writes, "If the claim of the other is to reach me, it must be mediated in some way, which means that our very capacity to respond with non-violence ... depends upon the

²⁴ Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 30.

²⁵ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 19, 43; Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 148.

frames by which the world is given and by which the domain of appearance is circumscribed.”²⁶ Cossey has, here, created a frame in which certain events are to be shown or not shown, and thus her experiences come to us in a mediated fashion which still demands our nonviolent response. To be nonviolent, we have to poke around the frame a little, seeing what it excludes – as Butler argues, we must “apprehend [the] precarity at the limit of the frame.”²⁷ However, this is not a hole one may think exists, unless one reads both of Cossey’s autobiographies. It reminds us, in a gentle way, to stay alert to omissions and excisions as much as to the positive content of the texts, and to always remember that – regardless of which holes can be detected – autobiography is always a frame that, by framing, also excludes.

As I have already touched upon, economic precarity links up inherently – in the case of trans women – with medical precarity, due to the cost of trans healthcare. While Eric Plemons argues that the neoliberal shift toward privatized healthcare in the 1980s created economic difficulties for trans women seeking surgeries,²⁸ as we have seen, even prior to the 1980s during Cossey’s transition, access to gender affirming care created great financial hardships. I hesitate to even divide economic and medical precarity, but they do have their differences. One can cause the other; one can exacerbate the other. As Plemons notes, surgery is but one costly element of a trans woman’s transition – he lists, “Psychotherapists, endocrinologists, hormone prescriptions, ongoing hair removal, insurance copays, and various surgical interventions”²⁹ as contributing to

²⁶ Butler, *Frames of War*, 180.

²⁷ *Ibid*, xvi.

²⁸ Eric Plemons, *The Look of a Woman: Facial Feminization Surgery and the Aims of Trans-Medicine* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), 12.

²⁹ Plemons, *The Look of a Woman*, 95.

the cost of transitioning. This highlights not only that many other costly processes constitute transitioning, but also that gender affirming surgeries usually are not solo episodes. As mentioned above, Cossey's gender affirming top surgery only took place when it did due to luck; most trans women are not so lucky. As Plemons notes, desperation drives many trans women to seek the aid of unlicensed plastic surgeons, sometimes with dangerous results.³⁰

But the economic side of medical precarity is not the only side of medical precarity we see either in trans lives or in trans life writings; more noticeably, the risks and pain of the surgeries themselves become clear in trans memoirs and autobiographies. While writers such as Christine Jorgensen and Jennifer Finney Boylan tend to gloss over the painful details of their gender affirming healthcare, Cossey broaches the subject directly in her autobiographies. As she writes in her second autobiography, after receiving genital sex reassignment surgery (GSR), "It felt as though someone was tearing my flesh out. To add to the discomfort, I had a catheter draining my urine and a mould holding my 'vaginal' canal open."³¹ Several aspects of this passage are worth pointing out specifically, such as the general statement of pain in the opening simile. Cossey does not specify where it feels as though her flesh is being rent – in fact, in a certain place, her flesh *has* been torn out. She writes here of a general, all-consuming pain, but returns immediately to the concrete. The catheter highlights the indignity of the situation, as well as further discomfort. Perhaps most significant is her reference to the dilator, in which she puts "vagina" in quotations, as if the pain of the situation does not allow her to cognize the neo-vagina as what it is. Rather, at this point in the narrative, the neo-vagina is merely a site and

³⁰ Plemons, *The Look of a Woman*, 72-74.

³¹ Cossey, *My Story*, 98.

cause of pain, both specified and generalized throughout the body. Here, Cossey does not leave anything out – her frame leaves no imaginable absences for the reader’s sake. In fact, upon reading her first autobiography’s similar description of the surgical aftermath, her future ex-husband asked, “Did you have to put in so many gory details?”³² This is an unusual moment in which we read the writer writing of a reader’s response to what is essentially an earlier version (*I am a Woman*) of what the reader is currently reading (*My Story*), and it likely replicates the thoughts of many readers of both works. This meta moment shows that Cossey is well aware of the grotesqueness of her surgery scenes, and reading her accounts is helpful in reading other trans memoirs that do not go into such detail. Jorgensen, quite the opposite of Cossey, largely elides the recovery process, writing:

Within a few days, I was resting well and had experienced little serious discomfort. The postoperative care, however, was rather involved and I was confined to bed for a much longer time than I’d expected. The days of convalescence were uneventful ones, following each other in the monotony of hospital routine.³³

Jorgensen gives very little detail about what was so “involved” about her recovery, and merely writes as if the surgery were something akin to having her wisdom teeth removed. What is the reader, here, to glean? Considering what we know of the process some decades later from Cossey’s accounts, it seems safe to imagine that the process in 1952 was at least as distressing, if not more so. The nonviolent reader must read the context, provided by other accounts and documents, beyond the small information given by Jorgensen in order to understand the full

³² Cossey, *My Story*, 175.

³³ Christine Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), 126-127.

gravity of the situation. (And of course, Cossey and Jorgensen both had successful surgeries, per any account, so we can only imagine the pain of failed surgeries.)

However, despite the extreme pain suffered by these trans women, we must remember that they had access to care in the first place, which requires a certain level of resources, but also the ability to tell doctors what they require to make a diagnosis. Trans women who manage to transition through official means are inherently autobiographers, as Jay Prosser argues, and a written trans memoir can only be written after the crafting of the initial narrative recounted to the various medical professionals whose word is required for access to gender affirming healthcare.³⁴ The narrative is restricted, Prosser argues, to a certain form in order to receive gender affirming healthcare. Gender affirming healthcare is accessible only to trans people whose behaviors and self-descriptions match up with medical authorities' stances on what constitutes a case of gender dysphoria; for instance, sexological authorities such as J. Michael Bailey would likely be highly skeptical of the benefits of a trans woman transitioning if she may be taken as a closeted gay man. Thus, trans women must craft a formulaic autobiographical (generally verbal) text in order to receive a diagnosis, and therefore gender affirming healthcare. This means the exclusion of any behaviors and experiences that may contradict the classical view of transsexuality, such as a masculine childhood. In fictional form, in the film *Girl*, we see the dangers of doctors' refusals, as the titular trans girl eventually mutilates her own genitalia in lieu of GRSR.³⁵ However extreme this fictional episode may be, as discussed earlier, many trans women do seek dangerous operations from shady surgeons due to lack of funding – or, perhaps,

³⁴ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 101.

³⁵ *Girl*, directed by Lukas Dhont (Gent: Lumiere, 2018), Netflix streaming.

a lack of diagnosis. In Jorgensen's autobiography, we see that a dearth of information leads her to self-medicate with estradiol, without any awareness of the specific dosages or exact solution required for safety.³⁶ Jorgensen does not, here, highlight the dangers of what she does, but it is worthy of note. These medical precarities often go unremarked in trans memoirs, creating a gap that is difficult to fill with specific readings. The very framing of trans memoirs in the medical context exists in some way beyond the texts themselves, and thus the attentive and nonviolent reader must seek to understand how medical exigencies shape the text, and the risks involved in telling (or not telling) a trans life story.

Even beyond the medical context, trans women experience extreme physical precarity throughout their everyday lives, and their memoirs make note of this. Ignoring the physical threats faced by trans women leads to arguments that trans women imitate misogynist notions of femininity, which may be true; however, the nonviolent reader must be aware of the exigencies behind this performance: not being attacked or harassed for being trans, or standing out as women in general. Boylan writes evocatively:

Above all [after socially transitioning], I was aware of a change in the way I occupied my body. I felt raw and vulnerable, exposed to the world. One day I was walking in a skirt through Lewiston, Maine, as rain fell and the wind howled around me, and I thought, There is nothing in a man's experience that is like this, and I didn't mean just the physical sense of cold wind on my legs.³⁷

While Boylan seems to interpret this affect of vulnerability as in some way inherent to her newly estrogen-dominant body, the reader must be attentive to the details of the passage, especially noting the reference to gendered clothing and exposure. One must, indeed, read

³⁶ Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography*, 77.

³⁷ Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York: Broadway, 2013), 140.

against the grain – which in this case would seem to be a biological determinism – but in an optimistic way, a nonviolent way. The nonviolent method pays attention to the details of the text that reveal its complexity, acknowledging that Boylan’s text seems problematic in this instance, while also calling attention to the breadth of its scope. In this instance, Boylan at first appears to be discussing her body as inherently vulnerable, while in fact she is discussing the affect of feminine exposure to the world and to violence in a complex, absolute, and perhaps ineffable way. Vulnerability is not merely physical, and here we must remember that our interpretative methods can either defuse or contribute to physical violence, as linguistic violence can function within the same structures as physical violence.³⁸

It is worth noting, here, that Boylan does not distinguish between her trans experience and any woman’s experience, and indeed it becomes difficult to distinguish specifically trans experience from women’s experiences in general within trans memoirs. When Cossey first travels from the hospital after GSRs, she experiences extreme distress when she realizes she is surrounded by men on the train. Her first thought is that every eye upon her is aware of her recent hospital stay and its reasons, and she obsessively fears being raped.³⁹ Now, there are several possible reasons for this fear. One is, as she notes, that she was still on pain medication, and thus her thoughts are a bit irrational. However, the other possibilities are likely either contributory to this reason, or solely the reason. Having experienced the above-enumerated pains, rape could be disastrous for recovery. But affectively, the new presence not of a penis but of a neo-vagina is a new domain of vulnerability made precarious – precaritized – under

³⁸ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 137.

³⁹ Cossey, *I am a Woman*, 132.

patriarchy. Cossey is experiencing on the one hand a fear that she is known as trans, and on the other a fear that is to some degree universal to women, cis or trans, under patriarchy and in rape culture. As above in the case of GSRs agonies, Cossey is here more explicit than her fellow trans life writers. Comparing this incident in *I am a Woman* to Boylan's passage quoted above, we see at play similar affects of new vulnerability after transitioning, but Cossey's account uses no restraint, and thus should inform our readings of all trans life writing. Introduction to womanhood – to any aspect of womanhood, physical or social – comes with particular costs, and at times the trans memoirist may skirt around some particular precarities that the reader must thereafter fill in.

Now, none of these physical precarities has been isolated; they have involved others, and so, continuing our trajectory of examining varieties of precarity, we turn to social precarity. We must keep in mind that no precarity can exist in isolation – only precariousness can – but these elements of precarity, despite often having physical repercussions, take place between individuals in society, rather than in nominally illegal acts or on the surgery table. Not all violence is physical; much of it exists within fields that most might think of as peaceable such as language.⁴⁰ Trans women face a number of facets of social precarity, including harmful gossip, epistemic exploitation, testimonial injustice, and hermeneutic injustice.

Gossip is almost certainly not what comes to mind when one thinks of violence, but it can have quite deleterious effects on the lives of trans women, and constitutes an exigency behind much trans life writing. Thus, trans women may be motivated to include and exclude some information or aspects of themselves in order to assuage the press. As Cossey writes at the end of

⁴⁰ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 137.

her first autobiography, "... I found different articles about myself appearing all over the world. It was that which finally decided me to write this book. It seemed pointless to cover up anymore, the only thing to do was set the record straight. I hope I've done that. I've been very honest, and I've put right some of the inaccuracies that have appeared in the press."⁴¹ Cossey here states quite directly the purpose of her first autobiography, *I am a Woman*: to correct the press, especially insidious gossip columns and magazines, such as the one that had outed her (and outed her again after her wedding several years later).⁴² Later, however, she writes that she penned *I am a Woman* to also encourage other trans women, and to change societal views on trans people in general.⁴³ On the one hand, she wrote *I am a Woman* to quell gossip; on the other hand, she wrote *My Story* to promote press. As she writes at the end of *My Story*, her second autobiography, at the time of its writing, she intended to stir up publicity for the issue of trans marriage rights, having just been deprived of a divorce settlement by the courts.⁴⁴ While she does not list writing the book as among the facets of her publicity generation – she only mentions it as something that would keep her busy – it seems reasonable to assume that she also intended the book to constitute part of her campaign for awareness of trans marriage issues.⁴⁵ Jorgensen, however, writes of her intents as more similar to those behind *I am a Woman*. At the end of her autobiography, she states, "Above all, I've tried to correct the misconceptions that have prevailed over the years, and to answer the questions most frequently asked concerning the circumstances

⁴¹ Cossey, *I am a Woman*, 166-167.

⁴² Cossey, *My Story*, 200.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 136-137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 223.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

of my transformation ... I had no wish to create an apologia for my life, I merely wanted to set the record straight.”⁴⁶ The phrase “set the record straight” occurs in both *I am a Woman* and Jorgensen’s *A Personal Autobiography*, showing that the trans women writers are well aware that gossip constitutes some form of unified intent and archive – a “record” – that can be shifted and shaped given enough force.

The issue of the press leads us to the issue of epistemic exploitation. While epistemic exploitation usually refers to the requirement of marginalized people to educate privileged people about their experience of oppression,⁴⁷ I expand it here to include prying by privileged (cis) people for information about marginalized (trans) people’s lives, especially regarding precarity, often in highly inappropriate ways. The documentary film *Disclosure*, for instance, reveals many instances of talk show hosts asking trans women about how they tuck, or whether they can orgasm (to which Cossey replies, “Well, I think, like most women would say, you know, it depends on the guy really”).⁴⁸ This type of questioning about medical precarity, and epistemic exploitation in general, provides the impetus behind much trans life writing. The chapter in which Boylan discusses *Conundrum*, for instance, serves as a basic primer in trans identity.⁴⁹ Similarly, Boylan clearly realizes that readers will speculate about whether she can orgasm, and states with some delicacy that she can, and that the difference between pre-GSRS and post-GSRS orgasm “reminds [her] of, more than anything else, ... the difference between

⁴⁶ Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography*, 308.

⁴⁷ Nora Berenstain, “Epistemic Exploitation,” *Ergo* 3, no. 22 (2016): 570.

⁴⁸ *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, directed by Sam Feder (Los Gatos: Netflix, 2020), Netflix streaming, 55:20.

⁴⁹ Boylan, *She’s Not There*, 244-251.

Spanish and Italian.”⁵⁰ While the radical feminist critic who accepts Blanchard’s typologies (which I will discuss later) would likely label this, among other aspects of Boylan’s memoir, as a sign of autogynephilia, keeping in mind the exigencies behind the text reveals that this is essentially a forestalling of epistemic exploitation. The writer in such an instance must consider it easier to write out the information, rather than be confronted by awkward questions in highly public instances, such as those shown in *Disclosure*. Kate Bornstein, in what appears to be a tradition of humorous responses to the question concerning orgasm, replies, “Yah, the plumbing works and so does the electricity.”⁵¹ Through these examples, we can see that while trans women actively work to defuse the awkwardness of questions through humor, epistemic exploitation creates difficult and exhausting social scenarios for trans women, and shapes one of the exigencies behind the writing of trans memoirs and autobiographies.

Epistemic exploitation is only one kind of epistemic injustice, and trans women face several other kinds, especially testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice, on the latter of which I will focus. Testimonial injustice, which Miranda Fricker defines as an instance in which “prejudice on the hearer’s part causes him to give the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given,”⁵² is relevant throughout this paper; however, as I will later address the theories of Ray Blanchard and J. Michael Bailey, I feel that further explicit discussion of testimonial injustice is unnecessary, and this form of social violence is simply endemic to trans

⁵⁰ Ibid, 241.

⁵¹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 2016), 38.

⁵² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 4.

women's existences and life writing. However, hermeneutic injustice provides a more readily useful concept for discussion of interpreting trans memoir, and thus I turn to it.

Hermeneutic injustice occurs when a marginalized group lacks the appropriate language or hermeneutic resources to interpret and describe their experiences,⁵³ and we see the exploitation of this vulnerability manifested time and again in criticism of trans life writing and other personal statements. The tradition of criticizing LGBT people's explanations of their identities stretches back a considerable amount of time. Sigmund Freud, for instance, writes, "The theory of bisexuality has been expressed in its crudest form by a spokesman of the male inverts: 'a feminine brain in a masculine body.' But we are ignorant of what characterizes a feminine brain. There is neither need nor justification for replacing the psychological problem by the anatomical one."⁵⁴ While Freud's argument is correct – to this day, an argument for or against sexed brains will be controversial at best – he mistakes the gay man's point for one adequately expressed. In other words, whether or not the gay man in question believes in sexed brains, his ability to express his feelings regarding his homosexuality is strictly limited by the language of his time. Similarly, Sheila Jeffreys attacks trans people for believing in a deterministic gender essentialism, in which such theorists claim that gender – which has, per a radical feminist, been constructed by patriarchy – is either biologically or mysteriously created as an unchangeable essence.⁵⁵ However, as cultural critic Natalie Wynn explains, this essentialist

⁵³ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (Toronto: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 7:142.

⁵⁵ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 15.

“gender metaphysics” tends to be merely a way of simply expressing the *feeling* of trans existence, rather than elaborating a theory most trans people hold as true in a more scientific sense.⁵⁶ While some trans women do likely hold problematic essentialist views, simple expressions of what appears to be harmful essentialism should not be taken at face value. Instead, we must practice what Fricker refers to as “hermeneutical justice,” in which the listener/reader realizes that the experiences of hermeneutically marginalized subjects may create difficulties in expression; as Fricker puts it, it is “an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutic resources.”⁵⁷ This is the nonviolent approach to hermeneutic difficulties, such as explaining trans identity, and thus my theory of nonviolent interpretation owes much to Fricker’s concept of hermeneutic justice.

We may enumerate many other forms of precarity, but it is best to leave off at a reasonable count, and others can pick up where I leave off; for now, the original question remains: how do we salvage transphobic theory in good faith, using the good parts and excising the transphobia? As we will see, Kate Millett argues that feminist literary theory must entail a reading of context. For her purposes, that context is patriarchy. For our purposes, we have simply substituted patriarchy for a more complex context focused on precarity. I would say that I have added little to what is in Millett’s work, save for this switch of contextual focus. And indeed, patriarchy is the root cause of much of trans women’s precarity. Past transphobic feminists have,

⁵⁶ Contrapoints, “Gender Critical,” YouTube Video, 7:35, March 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pTPuoGjQsI&ab_channel=ContraPoints.

⁵⁷ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 169.

for the most part, simply misread trans memoirs, and instating a nonviolent method of reading reveals how minute their mistake has been (although it is worth noting that a small minority of radical feminist works, such as a few by Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, are almost entirely transphobic in focus).

To shift toward a discussion of radical feminism, I do differ from Butler in one significant regard, and that is in their claim that womanhood is not inherently more or less precarious than any other existence. Butler argues that we must avoid reifying the differential vulnerabilities under precarity into “norms of description” – in other words, we must avoid making the leap from “women are more vulnerable under a certain regime of governmentality” to “women are more vulnerable as an essential facet of womanhood.” Butler wants to avoid essentializing womanhood as inherently more vulnerable than any other identity.⁵⁸ However, I hold with Catharine MacKinnon that gender is produced as an effect of hierarchy, to affirm hierarchy, and thus that hierarchy is not in some way a contingent aspect of sex, but is rather constitutive of it.⁵⁹ Following this radical feminist dogma (one that points toward the goal of gender abolition), I find it apt to consider certain populations inherently more precarious, because by their very nature as a population separate from another, they are the subordinate rung in a hierarchical arrangement of power, and thus of security. Butler herself acknowledges the existence of such populations, albeit not recognizing women as among them.⁶⁰ Further, while Butler theorizes

⁵⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 139.

⁵⁹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 42.

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2021), 17.

sex/gender as performative, as essentially a citational practice of acting according to norms,⁶¹ the radical feminist must conceive of misogyny as having some sort of root in order to create a feminist politics. That root is reproductive anatomy.⁶² Reproductive anatomy is the grounding of misogyny, and anyone recognized as a woman is categorized accordingly into the subordinate sex class. Without this radical feminist groundwork, misogyny is a mysterious contingency lacking any explanation, and so too is transphobia. Transphobia functions in line with misogyny, as with most bigotry: trans women being recognized as women, or at least as counter-culturally imitating women, and trans men being perceived as women. A nonviolent practice must be based in a framework that can explain precarity, rather than one that would leave it to some bizarrely potent coincidence. If a gender theorist committed to anti-essentialist viewpoints has qualms with this perspective – indeed, we can see Butler’s entire early project as an attempted counter to essentialism – we can note that essentialism is not the enemy, and aligns with most experience. As Toril Moi writes, “The only kind of essentialism that feminists need to reject is biological determinism.”⁶³ Having this difference, I can now move on to discussing transphobic feminist interpretations of trans memoirs.

The most instructive case of a radical feminist reader of trans memoirs is that of Sheila Jeffreys, as she makes her framework and critical orientation quite explicit. Encountering a

⁶¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 188.

⁶² Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Quill, 1970), 16.

⁶³ Toril Moi, “What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender and the Body in Feminist Theory,” in *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 37.

dearth of literature critical of transgender studies, Jeffreys writes, “For this reason it has been necessary to read the celebratory or supportive literature that does exist ‘against the grain,’ that is to extract the copious evidence of the harm of transgenderism that is plain even in that which purports to promote the practice.”⁶⁴ Following this grounding remark, Jeffreys’ method of reading trans texts follows an extreme hermeneutic of suspicion. In fact, the phrase “against the grain” recurs in Toril Moi’s discussion of the hermeneutics of suspicion, where she argues that radically-oriented critics often feel the need to read texts “against the grain” of what seems obvious in order to promote their political ends. With this mentality, politically radical critics (such, we can add, as Jeffreys) then apply their particular lens to find hidden meanings, and the results of the search are contained in the method itself – in other words, the results of the skeptical critic’s search are always already contained in the political orientation of the critic.⁶⁵ A transphobic theorist such as Jeffreys will always manage to find the results she wants due to her bias.

This skeptical bias is bolstered by Jeffreys’ adoption of the framework of Blanchard’s typologies (i.e. sexologist Ray Blanchard’s theory that trans women are either “homosexual transsexuals” who transition for easier sexual access to straight men, or “autogynephiles,” for whom becoming a woman is a fetish).⁶⁶ As may seem obvious, Blanchard’s typologies rely on fitting trans women’s motivations, and indeed life narratives, into two categories, while either

⁶⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 11.

⁶⁵ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2017), 175.

⁶⁶ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 28-29.

ignoring or skeptically “reading against the grain” of narratives that do not fit the bill. Now is not the time to argue with Blanchard’s theories, but it is a propitious occasion to highlight the peculiar hermeneutics that ground the theory – namely, one of suspicion, as well as one of pathologization. J. Michael Bailey, Blanchard’s most prominent popularizer and advocate, expresses outright suspicion of his subjects’ words when they do not meet the needs of his study.⁶⁷ As he claims, trans women he refers to as autogynephiles “are often silent about their true motivation and instead tell stories about themselves that are misleading and, in important respects, false.”⁶⁸ Clearly, Bailey’s theory rests on this assumption, as a belief in his subjects’ testimony would prevent him from adopting Blanchard’s typologies. What this does allow him to do is to diagnose, or pathologize, his subjects – and, indeed, trans memoirists. He freely speculates that both Christine Jorgensen and Deirdre McCloskey are or were autogynephilic based on the contents of their autobiographical texts, for instance.⁶⁹ For an explicitly feminist – albeit liberal feminist⁷⁰ – example of this diagnostic habit, we can turn to Alice Dreger, who similarly clocks McCloskey as an autogynephile based on her memoir and personal

⁶⁷ For instance: J. Michael Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism* (Washington: Joseph Henry Press, 2003), 58.

⁶⁸ Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, 146.

⁶⁹ Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, 218.

This seems particularly odd in light of what would appear to be clear signs of so-called “homosexual transsexuality” in Jorgensen’s autobiography – which only goes to show that the framework is highly relative when applied to texts. To contradict Bailey’s claim about Jorgensen in the opposite direction, and within his own framework, see: Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography*, 44-45.

⁷⁰ Alice Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and One Scholar's Search for Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 4.

interactions.⁷¹ Rather than interpreting McCloskey's description of the joy she experiences from the results of her facial feminization surgery as an instance of alleviated gender dysphoria, Dreger interprets it as an instance of autogynephilia, simply because the pleasure results from something a cis woman would not usually notice, or would even be annoyed by.⁷²

While Jeffreys' adoption of Blanchard's typologies appears to be a recent development, not appearing in her earlier major argument against "queer politics,"⁷³ her adoption of a hermeneutic of suspicion long precedes it, as becomes clear in her much earlier discussion of Jan Morris' autobiography, *Conundrum*. As Jennifer Finney Boylan remarks, *Conundrum* was perhaps the most widely-read trans memoir of its time, likely because of Jan Morris' status as a famous travel writer.⁷⁴ For Boylan, Morris' autobiography highlights the dignity of trans women as humans beyond the tabloid imagery;⁷⁵ for Jeffreys, *Conundrum* highlights the misogyny allegedly inherent to trans women. Jeffreys points to passages where Morris exemplifies views of femininity as in some way naturally following from anatomy, and of gender as in some way akin to the Christian metaphysical concept of the soul.⁷⁶ In this essentially formalist analysis, Jeffreys applies a radical feminist conception of femininity, arguing that transsexuals uphold patriarchal oppression by "imitat[ing] the most extreme examples of feminine behaviour."⁷⁷

⁷¹ Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger*, 75-76.

⁷² Dreger, *Galileo's Middle Finger*, 76, 78.

⁷³ Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

⁷⁴ Boylan, *She's Not There*, 244.

⁷⁵ Boylan, *She's Not There*, 245.

⁷⁶ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 179-181.

⁷⁷ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 177.

In the usual radical feminist view of the matter, femininity is the result of patriarchy's more or less intentional hobbling of women in order to make them more helpless and less able to live without male aid.⁷⁸ Susan Brownmiller, for instance, shows how the high heeled shoe – a standard hyper-femme accoutrement – exists to hinder unconcerned movement, and argues that “in this artful handicap lies its subjugation and supposed charm.”⁷⁹ Femininity, then, is not some essential aspect of being a woman (of course, few feminists would believe it so), nor is it politically neutral; in fact, it serves the patriarchy, not women. Thus, for a radical feminist such as Jeffreys, Morris' enactment of femininity, and idea of femininity as inherent to womanhood, is deeply problematic – but this relies on a certain method of nearly formalist reading that may not consider *why* a trans woman would so diligently follow gender roles (for comfort, for instance, as well as safety, and so on). More recently, Jeffreys has also argued that trans feminism in general seeks to uphold femininity against feminist critique, clearly building off her earlier writings, such as her reading of Morris' text.⁸⁰ Jeffreys seeks to uncover misogyny by showing how Morris upholds sex roles, and does so easily, albeit with a particular hermeneutic that has become obvious: she applies her ideological lens (radical feminism) to a specifically bounded domain (the text of *Conundrum*) and draws her conclusions from this narrow reading.

For now, it is worth acknowledging that the view of gender expressed by Morris is, indeed, deeply reactionary, which Jeffreys readily points out.⁸¹ As she summarizes the views of

⁷⁸ Susan Brownmiller. *Femininity* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1984), *passim*.

⁷⁹ Brownmiller, *Femininity*, 186.

⁸⁰ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 48.

⁸¹ Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 180-181.

gender Morris expresses in *Conundrum*, “Gender here is something magical.”⁸² Morris expresses a highly essentialist view of gender, writing, for instance, “To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. ... It is the essentialness of oneself.”⁸³ To Jeffreys, this unveils the core view behind transgender politics – the idea that gender is in some way immutable and internal, thus necessitating physical changes, as the essential, internal sense of gender cannot be changed.⁸⁴ While we could certainly not blame Morris for holding what Miranda Fricker would refer to as the “routine” views of her time on gender,⁸⁵ we can certainly register some disappointment at the unusually religious-reactionary view of gender she expresses. Jeffreys, of course, expresses this disappointment in no uncertain terms. But what if, knowing that trans people inherently challenge the *status quo*, Morris sought desperately to reterritorialize her own existence? What if trans women – our bodies, our selves – automatically solicit (that is, shake up⁸⁶) the matrix of sex established by patriarchy, and Morris’ reactionary views are not her own, but rather her attempt to avoid impossible combat with the norms that dictate the contents of her writing? As Ephraim Das Janssen argues, the visible presence of trans people calls to our attention the constructed nature of sex and gender,⁸⁷ and trans people must of course choose to navigate this dynamic as they will. It is crucial to see that extent of the domain analyzed by the reader – that is, whether they stop at the bounds of the memoir, or whether their analysis includes

⁸² Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, 180.

⁸³ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 25.

⁸⁴ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 44.

⁸⁵ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 105.

⁸⁶ For this usage of *solicitation* to mean shaking up a structure, see: Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978), 6.

⁸⁷ Das Janssen, *Phenomenal Gender*, 63.

the exigencies behind the text – is a key difference between a nonviolent reading and Jeffreys’ methodology.

Janice G. Raymond follows a similar hermeneutic of skepticism in her earlier reading of *Conundrum*. As Raymond writes, “Not all transsexuals reveal their acceptance of stereotypical roles and behavior in the same obvious way ... Some transsexuals, for example, deny identification with the stereotypes on a verbal level but their actions or subsequent contradictory statements betray them.”⁸⁸ Morris she finds to be an example of this self-contradictory type. For Raymond, Morris’ early exuberance in certain aspects of her earlier masculine role disprove her “claim that [she] was always a woman.”⁸⁹ How, she asks, could Morris both claim a perennial womanhood and an earlier masculine lifestyle (and joy in such a lifestyle)?⁹⁰ According to Raymond, Morris’ move from enjoying masculinity to enjoying femininity makes sense if one considers that the flip side of the masculine stereotype is the feminine stereotype, so going from one to the other is not without the bounds of conservative ideology.⁹¹ Raymond, like Jeffreys, also attacks Morris for upholding femininity, claiming that this support for femininity counteracts any feminist claim Morris may make in the text. As Raymond writes, “What Morris never seems to recognize is that the ‘second-class citizenship,’ the inferior position in which women are put by men, is the logical consequence of their acceptance of femininity as a stereotype and mode of relating.”⁹² Raymond’s approach is somewhat more nuanced than

⁸⁸ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 86.

⁸⁹ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 87.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 89.

⁹² Ibid.

Jeffreys', looking not for simple examples, but for contradictions. However, Raymond similarly exemplifies the radical feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, remaining within the text of *Conundrum* and not looking to the possible reasons for the stances and behaviors it expresses.

Germaine Greer's review of *Conundrum* is a further variation of this skeptical method of reading, although Greer herself cannot be considered a radical feminist for reasons too extensive to visit here.⁹³ Within the span of three pages, Greer makes a number of arguments (or at least claims), including one against the very possibility of moving from one sex/gender to the other;⁹⁴ however, I would like to highlight only a few of the more pertinent ones regarding how she reads. For indeed, her reading style is unique in that at the most prominent instants of her review, she is not critiquing what is present in the memoir, but rather what is absent: locating absences and interpreting possible reasons for their absence. In this way, Greer's method ironically touches fingers, so to speak, with the nonviolent method. The three primary absences Greer points to are a lack of etiology of Morris' femininity in the text; a lack of discussion of Morris' post-transition body in *Conundrum*; and the silence of Morris' wife, Elizabeth, in the text.⁹⁵ In the first instance of a silence observed, Greer claims that a psychoanalytic awareness would have filled in certain gaps in the text that are filled by stylistic distractions (and, perhaps, led Morris to not transition, is the hint I take).⁹⁶ In the second instance, the dearth of bodily discussion, Greer

⁹³ For a brief but instructive overview of this conflict, see: David Macey, "Greer, Germaine," in *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 168-169.

⁹⁴ Germaine Greer, "Review of *Conundrum* by Jan Morris," in *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 189.

⁹⁵ Greer, "Review of *Conundrum* by Jan Morris," 190-191.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 190.

seeks to argue, albeit briefly, that Morris possesses an “enduring contempt for genitality in men or women.”⁹⁷ Interestingly, in this paragraph, Greer indicates an awareness that Morris is hoping, through the writing of *Conundrum*, to ward off accusations of perversion – a point with which I agree.

The final silence to which Greer points is the silence of Elizabeth, Morris’ wife. This is something of a decades-earlier predecessor to Jeffreys’ work on the alleged harm done to trans women’s wives through their spouse’s transition. As Jeffreys writes, trans women’s transitions are often portrayed as “an individual heroic quest,”⁹⁸ while the cis women surrounding the trans woman are left in the narrative dust. Indeed, *Conundrum* does fall into this type of solo quest narrative. As Morris writes, “I interpreted my journey from the start as a quest, sacramental or visionary, and in retrospect it has assumed for me a quality of epic, its purpose unyielding, its conclusion inevitable.”⁹⁹ While the solitariness of this quest is not explicit in this passage, it certainly does bring to mind the singular quests of old fairy tales, while for all the reader knows, Elizabeth resembles more the Lady of Shalott than a keen comrade-in-adventure, watching her spouse go by in a flash and seeking in vain for them thereafter.

However, this quality of the trans memoir is not – as Jeffreys or perhaps Greer may make it seem – an inherent aspect of the trans memoir. On the contrary, some trans memoirs do prominently feature the voices of trans women’s partners, such as in Boylan’s first memoir. Boylan remarks in her first memoir that her wife seemed separate from the early stages of the

⁹⁷ Ibid, 190.

⁹⁸ Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts*, 80.

⁹⁹ Morris, *Conundrum*, 170.

narrative, or directly quotes her wife as feeling as if she has lacked agency in the transition.¹⁰⁰ While, in fact, these statements of helplessness and a sense of non-participation or non-reciprocity may confirm Greer's and Jeffreys' points about the silence of trans women's wives, in the narrative, Boylan's wife hardly remains silent, and she wrote an afterword to the memoir.¹⁰¹ Here, Boylan's wife, Deirdre (known as "Grace" throughout the memoir), writes, "I don't feel like I've sacrificed myself or subsumed myself to anything."¹⁰² All of this is just to say that while Greer's reading of the silence of Elizabeth in *Conundrum* is apt, I do not agree with a generalization of it, such as Jeffreys' general claims about the silence of the wives of trans women. So, while Jeffreys and Raymond look respectively to a variety of positive contents of trans memoirs, Greer looks to the silences, teasing out gaps and inserting possibilities.

The background assumptions and goals of the radical feminist method of interpretation are worth uncovering – I have shown so far how these methods are skeptical and implicitly political (rather than predominantly aesthetic), but whence do they originate? Perhaps the most instructive place to look for a general statement of radical feminist literary theory is in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which features a lengthy exegesis of several significant authors.¹⁰³ Beauvoir's explicitly stated goal for the exegetical section is to vindicate her foregoing discussion of "the feminine myth."¹⁰⁴ And, accordingly, she finds in the conclusion of the

¹⁰⁰ Boylan, *She's Not There*, 111, 216-217.

¹⁰¹ Deirdre "Grace" Boylan, "Imagining Grace," in *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* by Jennifer Finney Boylan (New York: Broadway, 2013), 319-322.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 321.

¹⁰³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovny-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2010), 214-265.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 214.

chapter, “These examples show that the great collective myths are reflected in each singular writer ...”¹⁰⁵ In other words, to draw out the general theory enacted in Beauvoir’s feminist analysis, texts are not individual works to be examined as such, but are rather something akin to unified cultural symptoms, only with varying expressions.¹⁰⁶ For a second foundational text in radical feminist literary theory, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* provides the best place to seek a foundation, which she gives explicitly in her Preface, and which I quote at some length:

It has been my conviction that the adventure of literary criticism is not restricted to a dutiful round of adulation, but is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes or interprets, or even distorts. ... I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism which originates in aesthetic considerations, ‘New Criticism,’ never wished to do so. I have also found it reasonable to take an author’s ideas seriously when, like the novelists covered in this study, they wish to be taken seriously or not at all.¹⁰⁷

The method Millett outlines here is distinct from what she views as preceding it, which methods she rejects either for unsuitable formalism or unsuitable contextual considerations. She also rejects criticism based on value judgements. What she, like Beauvoir, establishes is a form of criticism that looks upon its subject matter as part of the broader life of a society, especially of patriarchy. It is not a historical criticism, but is rather a political and contextual criticism, one that argues with texts, even viewing unserious moments as of serious import. Unsurprisingly, Millett later turns to a series of male authors as demonstrative of her points, much akin to Beauvoir’s chapter discussed previously.¹⁰⁸ Introducing the purpose of these chapters, she writes,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 261.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 262.

¹⁰⁷ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), xiv.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 333-505.

“Our subject is now some of those who helped to build these structures [of sexual reaction] – writers who, after the usual manner of cultural agents, both reflected and actively shaped attitudes.”¹⁰⁹ Here we see quite blatantly that for Millett, authors play both active and passive roles: as actors, they create and reinforce ideology; as receptors, they demonstrate ideology that surrounds them. We can see this throughout the writings of radical feminists, or other feminist critics, whom we have examined thus far. In radical feminist critiques, the “blame,” so to speak, of what Raymond and others call the transsexual empire falls not merely or even primarily upon trans women themselves, but mostly on prevailing attitudes of which the trans women’s personal writings are both symptom and minor cause. From both of these foundational radical feminist literary analysts, we see that the texts they analyze serve the primary function of backing arguments and demonstrating points, but above all, we see that a theory of the intertwining of society and text is at play throughout their readings. To uncover the relevant meanings of the texts they analyze, of course, requires a type of political reading that is quite skeptical, reading seriousness where an author intends gaiety, and so on.

And of course, it requires context – of a certain kind, which brings us back to the positive project of demonstrating a nonviolent method of reading. One must draw a limit to context at some point in a contextual reading, and perhaps the only difference between their methods of reading trans memoirs and my methods is simply the inclusion of different kinds and extents of context. Now that we have seen several examples of our opponents and a brief examination of the foundations from which they have launched their attacks, it is apt to more clearly elucidate my methodology in opposition to the others that we have just seen. As sketched earlier, the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 329.

general methodological grounding of a nonviolent reading is one that attends to the precarity of the author, not making a hard distinction between author, world, and text. In this way, it differs from the radical feminist method of interpretation. While both are political, in some fashion, radical feminist methodology reads the context as primarily patriarchal, and nonviolent interpretation reads context as not only patriarchal, but also violent in more specific ways.

For, as has begun to take shape if perhaps implicitly, my primary criticism of preceding radical feminist literary theory is that it has not gone far enough in its contextual readings. While Millett, for instance, indicates the uselessness of literary history simpliciter and New Criticism for feminist criticism, it is my argument that she and her kindred do not fully depart from the New Critical or literary historical approaches. While Millett embraces a political approach, her contextual footwork is slight, meaning that she approaches texts with only the broadest context of production under patriarchy. For nonviolent criticism, we must consider the specific and material conditions of the production of life writing, rather than taking a political stance and squashing a text into it. Thus, it goes further into contextual reading than have past radical feminist literary theorists. And is this not in its very essence the goal of feminist theory? As Somer Brodribb writes, “I argue the best methodology for evaluating the practice of theory that is put before us as what feminists must attend to if we are really serious about social change is whether it originates from feminist politics and women’s experiences.”¹¹⁰ How much can we really engage *women’s experiences*, regardless of whom we consider women, without engaging in the material contingencies of their realities? As Brodribb further argues, theory that forgets

¹¹⁰ Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1992), xxvii.

matter is inherently patriarchal, a forgetting of motherhood, the “male ideology of *ex nihilo*.”¹¹¹ In order to be good *radical* feminists – for we must acknowledge that much of feminism is distinctly no longer concerned with women, and much of radical feminism’s power is its exclusivity – we must turn or return to the material exigencies behind texts, rejecting most male theory, in fact most theory, and instead focusing on the world (and therefore the writer) that generates texts. While this method is akin to the New Historical methodology, which Louis Montrose writes is concerned with “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history,” it differs from the New Historicism insofar as its focus is on *things*, rather than textuality alone, thus abandoning a Derridean grounding.¹¹²

According to Levinas, when we encounter the Other, we experience an injunction to not kill her – a compulsion that, inherently, entails the realization that we are capable of violence, and that the Other is capable of dying, of being killed, affected by the outside in violent ways. Further, per Levinas, we in fact *want* to kill the Other, just as we experience the compulsion not to.¹¹³ Regardless of how we theorize this compulsion to kill, we see that in the very encounter with the other/Other, we witness her precariousness.¹¹⁴ And as Franz Rosenzweig argues, this encounter is not only practical, but also textual:

It is the first duty of theoretical neighborly love (which among us creatures committed to mutual peeping and judging is no less important than the practical one – because being perceived wrongly hurts no less than being treated wrongly) that we never forget to ask

¹¹¹ Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*, 141.

¹¹² Louis Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veveser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 20.

¹¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), 232-233.

¹¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134.

ourselves about each opinion that we form about another person: can the other, if he is as I here depict him, still – live?¹¹⁵

In other words, how we theorize the other is equivalent to how we treat them in a physical manner (although I would argue that the two are intertwined), and our portrayal of this other person must be such that the other can actually live and breathe if they are as we so perceive them. Is this not the crux of nonviolent interpretation – to interpret trans women’s words and lives in such a way that their continued existence is not threatened by bigotry?

I find it easy enough to imagine the desire to violently interpret, to do violence to others qua writers or thinkers, as it is easier to tear down ideas than to uplift in an academic (or any interpretive) context. In the case of trans women who write on their lives, it is easy for a radical feminist, seeing a highly conscientious performance of femininity and a proclamation of problematically essentialist gender theory, to go on the attack. But we must remember the two sides of the encounter with the face of the Other: the Other stirs up violence within us, but also commands us, “Thou shalt not kill.”¹¹⁶ And the root of this commandment is not abstract, but is the witnessing of her precariousness, and therefore, by extension, her precarity. The struggle against the urge to violence is the root of nonviolence. As Butler writes, “Nonviolence is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action ...”¹¹⁷ We must not, here, make any hard distinction between the physical and the nonphysical, as interpretations of trans life writing has material

¹¹⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), 101.

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 132.

¹¹⁷ Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 24.

impacts on trans lives. Thus, as elaborated above, the nonviolent approach to reading trans memoirs involves witnessing the precariousness and precarity of trans women, which is no easy task, as it demands attention to both what is and to what is not within their life writings.

A general definition of nonviolent interpretation would read something like this: *a method of reading that considers texts as part of the world that surrounds them, with especial attention to the precarious conditions of the writer.* Such a definition is extremely broad, and this is because each group of people will experience precarity in different ways – if at all. But, in closing, perhaps we can also consider nonviolence as affective. An affect of nonviolent reading would be akin to an empathetic reading, one that focuses not on attack but on understanding and even defense. Linguistic violence is tied up in all structural violence,¹¹⁸ and thus nonviolent reading is an affectively involved awareness of this intertwining of violence, countering the urge to pile on to the author with an empathetic response. At this time, we lack any unified explanation for the existence of trans experience, and I doubt we will ever find such a general theory of it. As long as such a gap in our knowledge persists – likely, for eternity – all we can do when we read trans life writing is to be attentive to the specificities of the author’s life, and of trans life more broadly, not assuming that any word is to be taken in itself, but taking each text in the light of its context. Perhaps Boylan makes my entire argument when she writes, “Whether one thinks transsexuals are heroes or lunatics will not help to bring these people solace. All we can do in the face of this enormous, infinite anguish is to have compassion.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 137.

¹¹⁹ Boylan, *She’s Not There*, 248.

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CHAPTER III: UNDER THE SIGN OF *GEVURAH*: LESBIANS, VAMPIRES, AND LAW IN
BATWOMAN

Batwoman returned to comic stands in the early 2000s as an openly lesbian, Jewish woman, remaining to this day among the best-known LGBT characters in DC Comics' roster. The first Batwoman – Kathy Kane – existed merely to allay fears in the 1950s of Batman's potential homosexuality, providing him with a heterosexual love interest who essentially served as his prop until her death.¹²⁰ Indeed, even when Kathy Kane appears in flashbacks decades later, her role is merely to upset Batman – another tragic backdrop for the Dark Knight's brooding.¹²¹ Thus, the new Batwoman, Kate Kane, is an ironic throwback to this product of the 1950s' sexism. Operating largely independently of Batman, despite being his cousin, Kate Kane lives out loud as a lesbian, wearing tuxedos to parties and dating as publicly as any heterosexual woman.¹²² However, it is not my intention to dwell exclusively on Kate Kane's lesbianism – a trap into which most responses to her have fallen.¹²³ I hope, in this essay, to show that Kate Kane's connection to Jewish mystical symbolism (specifically, Kabbalistic symbolism) summons echoes of both law and the lesbian vampire tradition in literature and popular culture. Through this connection, contemporary Batwoman comics illustrate how the law restricts lesbian

¹²⁰ Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 61.

¹²¹ Grant Morrison, writer, *Final Crisis* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2014).

¹²² Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III. *Batwoman: Elegy* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2017).

¹²³ Valentino L. Zullo, "J.H. Williams III's *Batwoman* and the Depth of Surface: Visualizing a New Definition of Identity as Embedded in the Skin," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5, no. 2 (2014): 142.

and lesbian vampire literary representations, while also illustrating a potential for exceeding them: an “Unknown” trajectory that reaches outside the harsh justice symbolized by Batwoman.

Previous scholarship dedicated to the contemporary Batwoman has been limited in scope and in bulk – in other words, there is little of it, and what little there is has had a rather narrow focus. Valentino L. Zullo helpfully contemplates the use of skin and surface in early contemporary Batwoman comics, while Esther De Dauw concentrates on masculinity and the military in Batwoman comics.¹²⁴ Other articles may feature Kate Kane, but do not specifically concentrate on her. While I would like to limit the scope of my discussion to specifically Batwoman comics – rather than her appearances in The CW’s show, *Batwoman*, or the animated films *Batman: Bad Blood* or *Justice League Dark: Apokolips War*, I hope to broach several topics hitherto largely ignored in scholarship on Batwoman. These include, but are not entirely limited to, her Jewishness and her relation to lesbian vampirism. While De Dauw does mention Kate Kane’s relationship with the vampire Natalia Mitternacht,¹²⁵ her discussion remains limited and brief, while I hope to expand on this topic considerably. However, virtually no reference to Kate Kane as Jewish, let alone to her relation to Kabbalah, is to be found in the scholarship, which I hope to rectify.

Kabbalah is likely unfamiliar to most readers, even within literary criticism, and thus I find it helpful to begin by addressing the question of how Kate Kane connects to this hoary and obscure mystical tradition. Three overt references to Kabbalah arise in Batwoman comics, and

¹²⁴ Esther De Dauw, “The Monstrous in Batwoman: Military Masculinity and Domestic Spaces,” in *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*, ed. Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020): 71-88.

¹²⁵ De Dauw, “The Monstrous,” 85-86.

each is telling in its own way. The earliest Kabbalistic imagery in the series is a painting of the Tree of Life, visible in Kate Kane's apartment.¹²⁶ This immediately connects her to the *Sefirot*, to which I will return shortly. This visual reference is striking, if fairly minute on its page, and it immediately signals to the reader that Kate Kane is familiar with Kabbalah, and – as it appears in the same panel as her Menorah – visually establishes her as Jewish. The next reference to Kabbalah that I would put forward is not chronologically next, but is perhaps the most obscure. While pursuing the elemental villain, La Llorona, Kane peruses the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which translates to the *Book of Creation*.¹²⁷ While the *Sefer Yetzirah* is primarily a rather rationalist text addressing the creation of the universe,¹²⁸ it serves as the earliest lynchpin of Jewish mystical literature in large part due to its mythical use in the creation of Golems. The legend of the *Sefer Yetzirah*'s magical application in the creation of Golems is the result of a particular Kabbalistic tale in which several mystics contemplate the book for three years and use its wisdom to create a being out of clay, which they then struggle to eradicate.¹²⁹ However, Kate Kane's solution to the La Llorona problem does not at all resemble the solution of the students to their Golem conundrum – meaning, since she did not even attempt their solution, that she realized that La Llorona is not a Golem (but is, as she later remarks, a literal “ghost”¹³⁰). Regardless of the actual

¹²⁶ Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

¹²⁷ J.H. Williams III and W. Haden Blackman, writers, *Batwoman, Volume 1: Hydrology* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2012).

¹²⁸ *Sefer Yetzirah*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (San Francisco & Newburyport: Weiser Books, 1997).

¹²⁹ “Explanation of the Four-Lettered Name,” trans. Ronald C. Kiener, in *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan and Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 54-56.

¹³⁰ James Tynion IV, writer, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2020).

conclusion of the La Llorona story arc, this run-in with the *Sefer Yetzirah* indicates that Kate Kane is well-versed in at least early Kabbalah, knowing both a tale of the so-called “‘Iyyun Circle” as well as the *Book of Creation*.

Between these two references to Kabbalah falls the most significant reference, which will occupy us for most of the remainder of this paper: her comparison of her uniform to the *Sefirah Gevurah* (also known as *Din*). When her father, Jacob Kane, presents Kate Kane with her new crime-fighting suit, in its striking red and black, she remarks, “Red and black... *Gevurah*, the pillar of severity... the colors of **war**”¹³¹ (emphasis and ellipses in original). Thus, the reader need not make any leaps of interpretation – diegetically, the suit represents *Gevurah* (at least to Kate Kane; her father only seems to care about its low visibility in dark conditions¹³²). The question, for most readers, however, remains: what is *Gevurah*, and why is it significant? *Gevurah* is one of the ten *Sefirot* mentioned earlier; it is the fifth *Sefirah*. *Sefirot* are the ten aspects or faces, in Kabbalistic thought, of *En Sof*, or God – the ways in which *En Sof*, who is essentially an abyss of nothingness, can relate to the created or emanated world.¹³³ *Gevurah* is the source of evil, when the *Sefirot* are out of balance.¹³⁴ This makes perfect sense, as *Gevurah* is – as Kate Kane remarks – the *Sefirah* of severity, as well as of punishment and harsh judgement,¹³⁵ which, when out of line, create horrors. And, indeed, it is symbolized by the colors

¹³¹ Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

¹³² Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

¹³³ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 213-214.

¹³⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 237.

¹³⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 213.

black and red – as Rabbi Isaac the Blind of Provence remarks, “Now the hues of the mark of black (which are the hues of the attribute of Severity),”¹³⁶ and as Rabbi Azrael of Gerona remarks, “The fifth power can be likened to red light.”¹³⁷ Thus, the color symbolism of *Gevurah* is well-established, and Kate Kane’s instant awareness of its prescience is another obvious indication of her education in Kabbalah. Further, per some Kabbalists, our world was created under the sign of *Gevurah*, leading to its imperfections. According to this theory, worlds are created to exist for long periods known as *shemittoth*, and each *shemittah* is created under one of the *sefiroth*. Ours, unfortunately for us, is created under *Gevurah*, and thus we must await the messianic coming of the next, merciful, *shemittah*.¹³⁸ *Gevurah* stands, most often, for harsh judgement – for, in another way of putting it, harsh *law*, and our world is governed by its tendencies. It is worth noting that, within psychoanalysis, the color red has been associated with Christian imagery, specifically with Jesus Christ, but such Christian notions are irrelevant in the essentially Jewish narrative of Batwoman.¹³⁹

Of course, the color red is also associated with blood, and it is to blood that I now turn, in relation to vampiric imagery. As C.G. Jung remarks, “Red, as it is, is an emotional color and

¹³⁶ Rabbi Isaac the Blind of Provence, “The Mystical Torah – Kabbalistic Creation,” trans. Ronald C. Kiener, in *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan and Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 76.

¹³⁷ Rabbi Azrael of Gerona, “Explanation of the Ten Sefirot,” trans. Ronald C. Kiener, in *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan and Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 94.

¹³⁸ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 78-80.

¹³⁹ C.G. Jung, *Dreams*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 286.

stands for *blood, passion, and fire*,”¹⁴⁰ the fire association also being wherefore the association with *Gevurah*, as I believe an early Kabbalistic text, the *Book Bahir*, shows.¹⁴¹ Vampiric imagery is practically omnipresent in Batwoman comics, as Kate Kane is typically deathly pale with bright or dark red lipstick, with many frames focusing on her mouth. As Esther De Dauw writes concerning certain almost explicitly vampiric scenes in later volumes, “The focus on her teeth and her mouth, blood-red, invokes images of the female vampire, whose bloodthirsty and lustful nature threatens the established order.”¹⁴² I would extend this interpretation to most of Kane’s appearances in her initial series, wherein she certainly gives the impression of a slightly butch femme fatale – in other words, a vamp.¹⁴³ However, as we shall see, I will challenge this notion of the woman vampire as “threaten[ing] the established order.” The connections of vampire fiction to lesbianism are practically a commonplace, considering the popularity of *Carmilla* and its myriad adaptations and influences; the connections of vampire literature to Jewishness have also been explored in numerous texts. Simon Bacon, for instance, argues that Jewishness became associated with vampire literature essentially with *Dracula*, which was influenced by Eastern European Jewish migration to England.¹⁴⁴ However, I would argue for an earlier origin, as the

¹⁴⁰ C.G. Jung, *Children’s Dreams: Notes from the Seminar Given in 1936-1940*, ed. Lorenz Jung and Maria Meyer-Grass, trans. Ernst Falzeder and Tony Woolfson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008), 366.

¹⁴¹ *The Bahir*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1979), 53.

¹⁴² De Dauw, “The Monstrous,” 86.

¹⁴³ Julie Grossman, *The Femme Fatale* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2020), 18-19.

¹⁴⁴ Simon Bacon, “The Vampiric Diaspora: The Complications of Victimhood and Post-memory as Configured in the Jewish Migrant Vampire,” in *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*, ed. Deborah Mutch (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 113.

narrator of *Carmilla*, Laura, as well as Carmilla herself, purchase talismans featuring Kabbalistic symbolism alleged to ward off evil.¹⁴⁵ Thus, an ur-text of lesbian vampire fiction already features Jewish imagery.

Having defined my terms and themes thus far, I can expand on my initial thesis by being more specific: Batwoman's connection to *Gevurah* points to both her restriction by the law and to her presence in the flawed, harsh world of a lesbian vampire fiction; it is time, then, to turn to the manifestations of law in Batwoman comics, before returning more explicitly to vampirism. I propose to divide the manifestations of law into three categories: the sovereign law of the state, the superegoic law that constitutes Kane's conscience, and the Law of the Father that restricts her position with respect to sexuality. Firstly, I will discuss her complex relation to sovereign law in four instances: her expulsion from West Point; her romantic relations with police officers; her work with the governmental Department of Extranormal Operations (D.E.O.); and her separation from her fiancée, Maggie Sawyer, due to a child custody dispute. Next, I will discuss her conscience in her adherence to the so-called "Batman rule," which prevents her from taking lives in early volumes of her comics, in contrast to the ethical system of Wonder Woman/Diana Prince. As the final manifestation of law, I will discuss her sex life – specifically, how it is restricted by heterosexual models of sexuality springing from the phallic principle. In conclusion, I will discuss three trajectories beyond the law proposed by Batwoman comics: going where Batman cannot, sisterhood, and love.

Perhaps the most famous aspect of Kate Kane's origin story as the Batwoman is her expulsion from West Point for engaging in a lesbian relationship with a fellow student, during

¹⁴⁵ Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, in *In a Glass Darkly* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 268.

the years of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” rules. Coming from a military family, and being the more masculine of the twin Kane daughters, Kate Kane’s ascendancy to military success seems completely natural. However, when she is caught in violation of military morality code, she refuses to lie, leading to her immediate expulsion from the academy. Esther De Dauw argues forcefully that Kate Kane’s entire early story arc exemplifies a form of “military masculinity,”¹⁴⁶ with which I largely agree; however, my focus differs from De Dauw’s in that my core concern regarding this episode in Kane’s story is its relation to the law. Here, the law must contradict itself: while her superior officer provides Kane the opportunity to lie, she cites a code of conduct that requires her honesty.¹⁴⁷ Thus, her very adherence to the letter of the law requires her victimization under the law. What does this indicate? Firstly, it indicates that the law is flawed – at least, coming from a lesbian-friendly perspective, that the law would reject perhaps the ideal soldier due to her Sapphic attraction seems ridiculous and immoral. The law, in this instance, is not what I would consider moral, but is rather arbitrary and – harsh. This is not the law of a perfect world: it is a law of the *shemittah* of *Gevurah*. Secondly, this episode highlights that Kane is willing to suffer by the law. Despite the immorality of the law – a sentiment with which Kane would almost certainly agree – she is willing to submit to it in perfect honesty, resulting in great emotional damage. While she is in no dire financial circumstances, the episode sends Kane spiraling afterward into an increasingly wild, partying lifestyle that only ends when a man attempts to mug her (and thus when she first encounters Batman).¹⁴⁸ As a masculine individual practically bred to be a soldier, Kane’s rejection from the military is hardly akin to a normal job

¹⁴⁶ De Dauw, “The Monstrous,” passim.

¹⁴⁷ Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

¹⁴⁸ Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

loss. Her entire life trajectory vanishes the instant she decides to follow the law into punishment. The poignancy of the sequence comes from Kane's strict adherence to the law that loathes her, indicating her complete subservience to its restrictions if not in behavior, then in acceptance of its discipline.

It should seem hardly coincidental, then, that Kate Kane's romantic relationships are generally with women associated with the law – whether military or police. Her first romantic relationship in the comics is her aforementioned affair at West Point,¹⁴⁹ meaning that her relationship is with a fellow future soldier. Her next relationship (chronologically) given in detail is with the crime boss, Safiyah,¹⁵⁰ whose nature as a criminal certainly shows that Kane has fallen from grace with the law that formerly governed her. However, Kane ultimately resists Safiyah's sway, leading to mass devastation on Safiyah's island home while she attempts to leave.¹⁵¹ While Kane later expresses great affection for Safiyah, even accepting a highly romantic kiss from her former lover,¹⁵² she refuses to return to her arms more permanently, indicating a return to the clutch of the law. Her next relationship is with Renee Montoya, a detective¹⁵³ – and although this relationship ends rather quickly, as I shall discuss later, the two

¹⁴⁹ Rucka & Williams, *Batwoman: Elegy*.

¹⁵⁰ Marguerite Bennett and James Tynion IV, *Batwoman, Volume 1: The Many Arms of Death* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2017).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Marguerite Bennett and James Tynion IV, *Batwoman, Volume 2: Wonderland* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2018).

¹⁵³ Yetta Howard, "Politically Incorrect, Visually Incorrect," in *Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 76.

remain friends,¹⁵⁴ and Montoya ultimately represents Kane's future in perpetuity.¹⁵⁵ Kate Kane's next, and most famous, long-term relationship is with Maggie Sawyer, another detective, formerly of Metropolis but recently transferred to the Gotham City Police Department (G.C.P.D.). The two become engaged and move in with one another after sharing numerous adventures and perils.¹⁵⁶ This relationship also features as Kane's primary romantic attachment in the alternate universe *DC Bombshells* series, indicating its popularity.¹⁵⁷ Following her separation from Sawyer – which I will analyze in some depth – Kane becomes romantically entangled with the vampire supervillain Natalia Mitternacht/Nocturna, to which relationship I will also return later for further detailed analysis. So, looking backward at this tumultuous love life, one trend emerges: Kane generally dates people in some way associated with legality in a very immediate sense, and when she does not, she rejects them and brings them to justice.¹⁵⁸ Thus, all her relationships shown in the comics are intertwined in some way either with the law or at least with its ultimate enforcement. Why?

¹⁵⁴ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

¹⁵⁵ Marguerite Bennett and James Tynion IV, *Batwoman, Volume 3: The Fall of the House of Kane* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2019).

¹⁵⁶ J.H. Williams III and W. Haden Blackman, writers, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World's Finest* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2013); J.H. Williams III and W. Haden Blackman, writers, *Batwoman, Volume 4: This Blood is Thick* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2014).

¹⁵⁷ Marguerite Bennett and Marguerite Sauvage, writers, *DC Comics: Bombshells, Volume I: Enlisted* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

¹⁵⁸ Bennett & Tynion, *Batwoman, Volume 3: The Fall of the House of Kane*; Mark Andreyko and Jeremy Haun, writers, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2015).

Perhaps the simplest answer is that Batwoman is a vigilante, concerned to some extent with law enforcement herself; however, Batwoman does not typically participate in the average crime-fighting of a police officer, but rather combats paranormal enemies such as La Llorona or other larger threats, such as supervillains. Kane's romantic connection to the law is more reasonably interpreted as her love of law itself. Little is more counterintuitive than this interpretation – how could a woman so victimized by the law, who is herself operating constantly outside it, *love* it? Perhaps it would be simplest to read this as a series of instances in which interpellation becomes clear: rather than in some way existing outside the law, existing in *relation to* it, Kane has been subjectified *by* it. Beyond her existence within a law-bound society, Kane was raised in a military household with strict discipline. In her early years as Batwoman, she even refers to her father as “Sir,” while in the field.¹⁵⁹ This subordination of the family relation to a hierarchical, military one suggests an intermingling of law and love in Kane's psyche that surely extends to her romantic relations. While I will return to the subject of hierarchy in Kane's relations in my discussion of *Nocturna*, it is worthwhile here to focus on the military aspect of this dynamic. Rather than experiencing her father as a loving or supportive figure – which he, in most instances, is – she experiences him as a military officer, meaning that her love for him (which she clearly feels) is experienced as to a military figure, rather than to a fatherly object of affection. Her love is soldier to officer, not daughter to father. The authority of the father, experienced naturally during her upbringing, becomes refigured as the authority of the officer. Can we not extend this analysis to her relation to Montoya and Sawyer? Her love would then be soldier to detective – as Julia Pennyworth states to Kane, “You are not a detective, you

¹⁵⁹ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

are a soldier,”¹⁶⁰ contrasting her role (coincidentally) with the role of her past lover and fiancée. What she loves about Montoya and Sawyer is, at least in these early comics, their very position with respect to the law, a law which she failed to live up to at West Point. The very limitation expressed by their relation to the law is their attraction.

But here, it is worth addressing Kane’s actual work as a law enforcement officer as she is blackmailed into operating for the D.E.O., an organization designated to handle situations involving metahumans (superhuman beings) and other supernatural occurrences. Agent Chase, who greatly resembles Sawyer, Kane’s lover at the time, blackmails Batwoman into service for the D.E.O. by threatening to reveal her identity as Kate Kane.¹⁶¹ The D.E.O. is surely an imperfect instance of the law under *Gevurah*, relying on blackmail and other forms of brutality and subterfuge to accomplish its goals. For instance, the D.E.O. later goes along with Batwoman’s idea of requesting help from Diana Prince – albeit with the goal of spying on the Wonder Woman herself,¹⁶² to whom some say it is impossible to lie, lasso or not.¹⁶³ The D.E.O. also uses Kane’s captive sister, Beth Kane, as leverage to force Batwoman to capture Batman and reveal his identity.¹⁶⁴ While the D.E.O. is an obvious instance of the imperfection of the law, its orders also lead to a direct clash with a more perfect law, manifest in the figure of Barbara

¹⁶⁰ Bennett & Tynion, *Batwoman, Volume 3: The Fall of the House of Kane*.

¹⁶¹ J.H. Williams III and W. Haden Blackman, writers, *Batwoman, Volume 2: To Drown the World* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2013).

¹⁶² Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World’s Finest*.

¹⁶³ Greg Rucka, *Wonder Woman by Greg Rucka, Volume 1* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

¹⁶⁴ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 4: This Blood is Thick*; Mark Andreyko, writer, *Batwoman, Volume 5: Webs* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2014).

Gordon/Batgirl.¹⁶⁵ Gordon, the daughter of G.C.P.D. commissioner James Gordon, in this instance emblemizes innocence and virtue, with her golden and purple-themed suit and youthful complexion contrasting starkly with Kane's inhuman pallor and harsh red and black suit. Kane has been assigned by the G.C.P.D. to bring in a criminal, for whom Batgirl has other, merciful, rehabilitative plans. The details of this conflict are unnecessary to explain; what matters is that Batgirl in every way stands for a more decent form of law, while Batwoman is in the thrall of a highly flawed, immoral law enforcement organization. Her soldierly, opportunistic fighting style contrasts with Batgirl's as the two clash, with Batwoman's brutality ultimately winning out against Batgirl's dancer-like grace. Perhaps tellingly, Batgirl's yellow emblem aligns with the color symbolism of the *Sefirah* of compassion, *Tiferet* or *Rahamim*.¹⁶⁶ *Rahamim*'s explicit task among the *Sefirah* is to negotiate between *Gevurah* and *Hesed*, the *Sefirah* of love.¹⁶⁷ Thus, Batgirl, in refusing to give up a criminal to the D.E.O.'s imperfect justice, shifts the balance from *Gevurah* toward *Hesed* – although, predictably, in the *shemittah* of *Gevurah*, it is Batwoman who wins the fight.

My final example of the sovereign law is the custody dispute that leads to Kane's separation from Maggie Sawyer. The drama begins in what is now collected in the fifth volume of Batwoman's initial series – in other words, after the infamous departure of the original creative team over this very matter.¹⁶⁸ Sawyer's ex-husband, Jay, files for sole custody of their child, Jamie, who has previously been staying with Sawyer. Kane is aware of the situation and its

¹⁶⁵ Gail Simone, writer, *Batgirl, Volume 2: Knightfall* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2013).

¹⁶⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 213.

¹⁶⁷ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 213.

¹⁶⁸ Neal Curtis, *Sovereignty and Superheroes* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2016), 148n1.

gravity; despite the failure of the marriage, as Kane exclaims to a lawyer she is attempting to solicit for the case, “Jamie is Maggie’s heart and soul and it kills me to think she might lose her daughter.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, as it “kills” her to think of it, Kane calls Jay and makes a deal: if she leaves Sawyer, removing any sort of so-called “moral” reason for him to make his case, he will drop the case and leave the custody deal as-is. They both follow through on their parts. As Kane explains to Sawyer in a lengthy letter, “This custody mess with her dad would never have accelerated if it wasn’t for me. I put you in the position of having to choose your child or me. Accidentally or not, that’s what I did and I’m sorry. So I made the choice for you. That’s why, for now, this is goodbye.”¹⁷⁰ This portion of the letter emphasizes the impossibility of the choice for both of the partners – a choice necessitated by the imperfect law’s relation to lesbianism. However infamous it may be in extradiegetic ways, this episode highlights the limitation of lesbian relationships by the sovereign law, and leads immediately into Kane’s relationship with Natalia Mitternacht/Nocturna. The limitation of a loving lesbian relationship by the sovereign law directly rubs up against the most blatant lesbian vampire arc of the texts, to which I will return at some length. For now, we turn to the superego, and specifically, the “Batman rule.”

Among the most fraught conflicts over the nature of justice in the history of the Justice League in DC Comics takes place between Wonder Woman and the other members of the “Trinity”- Batman and Superman - during a key story arc in the early 2000s. Amid a crisis surrounding the genocidal “OMAC Project,” supervillain Maxwell Lord exercises his mind control powers to turn Superman into a raging maniac, who hallucinates that his friends are

¹⁶⁹ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 5: Webs*.

¹⁷⁰ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 5: Webs*.

actually his enemies in the process of killing his loved ones. Wonder Woman/Diana Prince, being the second most powerful member of the Justice League,¹⁷¹ intercepts Superman, and the two fight until Wonder Woman wins a temporary victory and arrives at Lord's fortress. When Lord tells her, under the influence of her Lasso of Truth, that the only way to stop his mind control powers is to kill him, Wonder Woman obliges. She snaps his neck in a two-panel sequence that emphasizes her complete calm and determination, her Athena-given gray eyes set in an uncharacteristically emotionless stasis across both panels.¹⁷² As Superman later recalls to Lois Lane, "...There was *no* rage in Diana's eyes. There was nothing. Not even remorse."¹⁷³ What this, and the visuals of the panels, emphasize is that the decision was not difficult for Wonder Woman; for her, killing comes relatively naturally. The decision is a simple utilitarian calculus over which Wonder Woman does not struggle. The conflict after this episode arises due to the other Trinity members' unwillingness to kill. In Batman's case, he even lends his name to this mainstay of superhero ethics: "the Batman rule."

This conflict during the OMAC Project crisis finds its reflection in the ethical conflict between Diana Prince and Kate Kane in a much later story arc. Prince and Kane head to the desert to locate Pegasus, whom they believe may have information regarding the sinister Medusa organization (and entity). However, when they arrive at his location, they find him severely

¹⁷¹ Peter J. Tomasi, writer, *Superman/Wonder Woman, Volume 5: A Savage End* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

¹⁷² Greg Rucka, Judd Winick, and Geoff Johns, writers, *The OMAC Project* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2005).

¹⁷³ Greg Rucka, Mark Verheiden, and Gail Simone, writers, *Superman: Sacrifice* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2006).

mutilated, and as he remarks, “If we live forever, so too do our wounds. Mortals will have vanished from the earth before I am whole again.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, in exchange for information, he requests death, saying, “But there’s a *price* for my immortal wisdom. A price only the Amazon can pay ... Do not leave me in this state. Take my head. Give me a warrior’s death,” to which Prince replies, “If I do this, you will never return.”¹⁷⁵ He accepts this fate and Prince swears to abide by his wishes. However, already apparent in this fragment of dialogue is a conflict: only “the Amazon,” Prince, can grant this wish, because Batwoman is a member of the “Bat family,” and therefore cannot take a life. After Pegasus gives the duo the necessary information, in the final moments of his life, Kane impotently cries out for Prince to “*Wait!*” Nevertheless, by the time the blade descends, Batwoman faces away from the scene of the beheading. The panel that would otherwise have shown the decapitation itself merely shows a closeup of Batwoman’s cowed face, obscured in shadow save for the white eyes and red wig, putting the reader in her position (that is, as she has turned away from the death, so has the reader).¹⁷⁶

This brief conflict and the dialogue that comes after it reveal a striking difference between senses of justice. Following the sequence, of the killing itself, the two superheroines argue, with Kane claiming, “There should have been another way,” to which Prince replies, “You think this was murder. I value life the same as you. This was *mercy*.”¹⁷⁷ While Prince goes on to explain the difficulties of healing as a weakened immortal, this opening statement reveals that, whereas for Kane all killing is the same, Prince has a more nuanced notion of killing. For

¹⁷⁴ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World’s Finest*.

¹⁷⁵ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World’s Finest*.

¹⁷⁶ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World’s Finest*.

¹⁷⁷ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World’s Finest*.

Prince, killing can be just under certain conditions, whether those conditions are preventing Superman from destroying the Justice League, or relieving Pegasus from eternal suffering. For Kane, however, all killing is essentially the same action; context does not factor in. While Prince's behavior is modifiable given different circumstances, Kane's behavior is entirely bound by unbending law – the “Batman rule.” This indicates that Kane's behavior emerges from preestablished law, while Prince's behavior emerges situationally; in other words, and to get to the point, Wonder Woman makes her own rules, while Batwoman follows an introjected superego. That this is a matter of superego, rather than merely an external rule, can be seen in the powerful affective responses Kane has to Pegasus' killing, eventually proving unwilling or unable to watch it. In fact, she even finds herself believing that Pegasus is not truly dead; following the main thrust of the argument, she asks, “Will he come back if people *believe*?” to which Prince replies, “Maybe it's possible... someday.” Kane concludes, “Then I choose to believe.”¹⁷⁸ Her choice of words here is interesting, as the odds of him coming back from the dead are perhaps nil. She “choose[s]” to believe, because participating in this traumatic event in some way implicates her – because, while she did not break her law, her conscience, emerging from her superego, is stronger than the facts. To cleanse herself of this crime, she must eradicate not her own shame, which would be impossible, but rather the event itself. If Pegasus is not actually dead, then there was never a killing, and the superego remains in check.

Broadening our scope of analysis, and broaching the subject of the lesbian vampire directly, two other episodes highlight this law of the superego as such: an alternate future issue in which Kane becomes a vampire proper, and a hallucination in which she becomes a giant bat.

¹⁷⁸ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 3: World's Finest*.

The former episode highlights her repression, leading to different behavior from her vampire kin; the latter illustrates her fear of becoming overwhelmed by her superego. The former episode comes in an alternate future issue included at the end of the collected editions of her New 52 series – in other words, her first series. This positioning makes sense, in part, because of the characters included in the issue, but it is also suggestive in that it implies a perhaps inevitable downfall. Adding to this potential interpretation is the visual element of her transformation, in which proper bat wings replace her bat wing themed cape. Regardless of speculations concerning editorial decisions, this episode is essentially a “what if?” scenario in which Kane becomes a proper vampire from being bitten by her former lover, Natalia Mitternacht/Nocturna. Unlike Mitternacht, however, vampiric Kane is hardly a femme fatale in this issue, following more of the monstrous archetype of the vampire and killing indiscriminately.¹⁷⁹ In contrast to the vampires of DC’s contemporaneous *I, Vampire* reboot series, in which the vampires are moderately humanlike despite their generally monstrous behavior, Kane is here pure monster, sheer bloodthirsty aggression with a paltry ability to appear normal in a brief effort to deceive her sister, Beth Kane/Red Alice.¹⁸⁰ I would like to suggest that Kane’s additionally monstrous behavior comes from her superego’s repression of her bloodthirsty desires, or at least of her aggression. As a vampire, she behaves erratically and selfishly, becoming totally the opposite of her old self, which was always controlled, always working to save others. Perhaps becoming a

¹⁷⁹ Andreyko & Haun, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

¹⁸⁰ Joshua Hale Fialkov, writer, *I, Vampire, Volume 1: Tainted Love* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2012); Joshua Hale Fialkov, writer, *I, Vampire, Volume 2: Rise of the Vampires* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2013); Joshua Hale Fialkov, writer, *I, Vampire, Volume 3: Wave of Mutilation* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2013).

vampire is simply a waking dream for someone such as Kate Kane: a chance to explore her repressed urges.

The second episode I would like to highlight in this context takes place when, under the influence of Scarecrow/Jonathan Crane's fear toxin, Kate Kane becomes a giant bat. Scarecrow, having placed Kane under the influence of his signature drug, taunts her, claiming that she brings destruction wherever she goes. In response, she begins a lengthy monologue which I will quote selectively: "I loved a *symbol* more than *family* ... What am I terrified of being? *What am I going to choose to become?! ... monstrous, diseased, and alone ...*"¹⁸¹ While her willingness to become "monstrous, diseased, and alone" is clearly a direct response to Scarecrow's taunts, she literally chooses to become the symbol she "loved ... more than family": a giant bat. Her phrasing during this speech, presumably because she feels as if she is physically metamorphosing during it, is erratic, but suggestive. What she is "terrified of being" is what she is "going to choose to become"; clearly, rather than just fearing loneliness, she more centrally fears becoming entirely subordinated to her symbol, the bat. And thus, when it comes time to literally embody what she most fears, she transforms psychically into a gigantic rendering of a terrifying bat. Whereas in the previous episode I examined, she becomes what she truly wants to be – free and narcissistic – here, she willingly becomes what pains her: her own superego.

Having broached the subject of vampirism, it is time to turn to perhaps the most notorious episode in Kane's plot trajectory: her relationship with Natalia Mitternacht, better known as the villainous vampire Nocturna. Following Kane's breakup with Sawyer, she enters into conflict with Nocturna, who quickly determines her identity as Batwoman. Nocturna displays her

¹⁸¹ Bennett & Tynion, *Batwoman, Volume 2: Wonderland*.

hypnotic powers, then seeks out Kane's apartment, where she hypnotizes Kane into submitting to an erotic entanglement. Mitternacht's dialogue and behavior here are explicitly expressive of outright, intentional rape: Kane assumes that Mitternacht is Sawyer, and remarks that she feels "a little light-headed," likely due to drinking "too much wine," to which Mitternacht replies, "Who do you **want** me to be? It **isn't** the wine. And I'm **not** 'Maggie.'"¹⁸² This dialogue takes place while Mitternacht's appearance flickers from Sawyer's to her own, and while she touches Kane's face, finally ending with a full-page panel of her grasping Kane by the waist in bed and biting into her neck, as Kane appears to be in the throes of ecstasy. Perhaps tellingly, this final panel is not indicative of any kind of internal or external conflict; several of Kane's erogenous zones are highlighted by the angle, and as mentioned, she appears to be enjoying herself. But later, this sexual episode proves to have been physically and psychically destructive to Kane, simultaneously snaring her as a servant of Mitternacht while also covering her in what appears to be a significant amount of blood.¹⁸³ Under Mitternacht's sway, Kane becomes vicious toward Sawyer, and experiences periods of "blackouts" during which she hallucinates that she does Mitternacht's bidding, in order to take the blame for the vampire's various violent crimes.¹⁸⁴ Of course, this is rather troubling. Kane is a rape victim whose entire personality is altered by the incident, her agency robbed of her not only during the rape but for many issues thereafter. Why would a title that has previously been so lesbian-positive end up visually celebrating explicit lesbian rape?

¹⁸² Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 5: Webs*.

¹⁸³ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

¹⁸⁴ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

Predictably, the rapist attempts to justify the situation as not-quite-rape. After being defeated by a newly-awakened Kane and her sister, Red Alice/Beth Kane, Nocturna confesses, but adds a twist to her conception of hypnosis, saying to Kane:

You **are** sexy, after all. Damaged, yes, but so much fun. You wanted something raw, a lesbian **Sid and Nancy** thing, kinky, yes? But that was all **yours**. Remember what your sister said: hypnosis can't make you do anything you don't really want to do. Sleep on **that**, you damaged twit. ... All I did was find an open door in your head. All the interior decoration in that room? **Yours**.¹⁸⁵

Perhaps what is most disturbing about this confession is its inclusion of “kink” as an excuse for rape, or perhaps what is most disturbing is that Nocturna essentially states that Kane wanted to be (rather brutally) raped and psychologically enslaved. Or, likely, what is most disturbing about it is that the text makes no effort to counteract Mitternacht’s ideas. The text likely assumes that the reader will take this as just another example of Kane’s traumatic history causing her trouble. A later issue of *Detective Comics* references the Mitternacht arc as part of a joke,¹⁸⁶ and indeed, Kane is confirmed to enjoy kinky activities in an issue of her later title.¹⁸⁷ However, the conscientious reader must remain aware of this situation for what it is: rape. Far from liberatory, lesbian romance here distorts into a distressing means of control for Mitternacht.

One important line of dialogue serves to connect this incident to the history of lesbian vampire texts more broadly. When Kane is still hypnotized and fighting Red Alice, the latter remarks, “You fetishized those **Hammer films** since you were six!”¹⁸⁸ As some readers may know, “Hammer films” here refers to the mid-to-late 20th century British studio that produced

¹⁸⁵ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

¹⁸⁶ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

¹⁸⁷ Bennett, *Batwoman, Volume 1: The Many Arms of Death*.

¹⁸⁸ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

nigh innumerable vampire films. Among their most famous films is their Sapphic, *Carmilla*-influenced “Karnstein Trilogy,” beginning in 1970 with the highly influential film *The Vampire Lovers*. So successful was *The Vampire Lovers* that, in the following year, no fewer than nine lesbian vampire feature films premiered, attempting to follow up on its popularity.¹⁸⁹ Thus, Hammer films to some extent have dictated portrayals of lesbian or Sapphic vampirism ever since. Indeed, Hammer films have influenced nearly all contemporary conceptualizations of vampires; as Nina Auerbach argues, vampirism lost much of its religious significance due to the Hammer films, in which the rules of vampirism changed to not allow vampires into daylight, and so on, as opposed to dying only at the hands of saintly slayers.¹⁹⁰ This influence cannot be overstated, and Red Alice’s reference to “Hammer films” is extremely important in considering how the history of lesbian vampire literature is omnipresent in Batwoman’s plotline, and especially during the arc featuring Mitternacht. Kane’s Sapphically-oriented fascination with vampire media apparently continues even long after her coerced affair with Mitternacht, indicating its centrality to her as a character.¹⁹¹

So, the question then becomes, how does *law* feature in lesbian vampire literature? This question will lead us directly back to the law in Batwoman comics, and will solve the pressing question of why a lesbian-positive title so readily replaced Kane’s healthy relationship with

¹⁸⁹ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, “Seductive Kindness: Power, Space, and ‘Lesbian’ Vampires,” in *Hospitality, Rape, and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture: Letting the Wrong One In*, ed. David Baker, Stephanie Green, and Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 203.

¹⁹⁰ Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 121-122.

¹⁹¹ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

Sawyer with a graphic, rape-centric one with Mitternacht. It is crucial to establish, firstly, that vampire fiction is incredibly bound by certain psychic rules. Susan Chaplin, for instance, argues that vampire fiction is intertwined with certain key capitalist influences, as well as that it more relevantly demonstrates René Girard's very rigid theory of scapegoating.¹⁹² While these arguments are not directly relevant to Batwoman, they do indicate the direct and barely concealed relevance of external and psychological rules and trends to vampire fiction. Just as vampires themselves are notoriously bound by rules, such as needing to be invited into a dwelling, their portrayals are also dictated transparently by tropic and sometimes historical determinants. One such determinant is a highly consistent trope in which male vampires are monstrous or ugly in appearance, while women vampires are all extraordinarily beautiful; this arises many times in *Dracula* itself,¹⁹³ and is demonstrated readily in Stephen King's '*Salem's Lot* when the narrator remarks, "He turned and saw the Norton girl, looking incredibly beautiful, walking toward him hand in hand with a stranger – a young man with black hair unfashionably combed straight back from his forehead."¹⁹⁴ Batwoman comics continue at least half of this trope, as the vampiric women – Kate Kane and Natalia Mitternacht – are both conventionally attractive, at least until later issues wherein Kane progressively adopts a more exclusively butch style. DC Comics' *I, Vampire* reboot title, contemporary with Batwoman's initial title, somewhat conforms to this trope as well, as Mary Seward, its main woman vampire, is conventionally beautiful and does not usually wear clothes, in stark contrast to the more ordinarily-clad male

¹⁹² Susan Chaplin, *The Postmillennial Vampire: Power, Sacrifice, and Simulation in True Blood, Twilight, and Other Contemporary Narratives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), *passim*.

¹⁹³ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 20, 38, 157, 186, 341, 343.

¹⁹⁴ Stephen King, '*Salem's Lot* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 479.

vampire protagonist.¹⁹⁵ Enumerating all such tropes and the external forces behind them would surely occupy many tomes.

Regardless, as I have remarked, Batwoman follows certain tropes of vampire literature; this leads me to the point that lesbian vampire literature tends to be among the most rule-bound of all vampire literature, perhaps due to its almost exclusive influence being *Carmilla*. Nina Auerbach even finds similarities in the contrasting of dark and light hair colors in two classic films of the lesbian vampire genre, *Vampyr* and *Blood and Roses*, illustrating a broader point: lesbian vampire texts tend to rely on a variety of (often eroticized) hierarchies.¹⁹⁶ According to my own analyses, these hierarchies include: mental weakness of the victim as opposed to the hypnotic or seductive abilities of the vampire; moral loftiness of the victim as opposed to depravity of the vampire (often emphasized visually by having the vampire be darker in coloration than her victim, as noted by Auerbach); lower class of the victim as opposed to higher class of the vampire (illustrated perhaps most disturbingly in *Dracula's Daughter* [1936])¹⁹⁷; age difference (this is even the case in the web series *Carmilla* [2014-2016], which portrays a consensual romance between mortal and vampire college students)¹⁹⁸; physical strength (including within consensual lesbian vampire couples, such as Morana and Striga in *Castlevania* [2017-2021])¹⁹⁹; and so on. Most of these tropes are present in *Carmilla* itself. As may be

¹⁹⁵ Fialkov, *I, Vampire, Volume 1: Tainted Love*; Fialkov, *I, Vampire, Volume 2: Rise of the Vampires*.

¹⁹⁶ Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, 55.

¹⁹⁷ *Dracula's Daughter*, directed by Lambert Hillyer (Universal Pictures, 1936).

¹⁹⁸ *Carmilla*, directed by Spencer Maybee (YouTube, 2014-2016).

¹⁹⁹ *Castlevania*, directed by various creators (Netflix, 2017-2021).

obvious, all these inequalities can allow for one party – generally the vampire – to more easily exploit their erotic partner (not to say romantic partner, in most cases).²⁰⁰ We have already seen how Mitternacht’s hypnotic abilities allow her to rape and enslave Kane, for instance. So, the prevalence of rape, or at least exploitative dynamics, in lesbian vampire texts is practically absolute, and its relevant tropes possess influence beyond lesbian vampire literature *per se*.²⁰¹

Addressing this omnipresence of hierarchy in lesbian vampire literature returns us to law, and to psychoanalysis. As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas states clearly, in the context of Sapphic vampire literature:

Rape (or the threat of rape) is often – although not always – symbolic, and in this less literal dimension, the prevalence of gendered violence and oppression can be seen as exerted on a broader social level, governed by the logic of patriarchy as much as it is from the threat of the monstrous Other typified by the figure of the ‘lesbian’ vampire.²⁰²

This passage stages a significant intervention in the theorization of lesbian vampire literature’s rape content. While usually the theorist’s first instinct is to think of the vampiric lesbian as a “monstrous Other,” here Heller-Nicholas rethinks her as equally “governed by the logic of patriarchy”: rather than being in some way transgressive of the norm, the lesbian vampire actually tends to reinforce patriarchal structures. Immediately this can recall a standard notion in psychoanalysis: that women’s *jouissance* is not limited by the phallic principle, as instantiated by the “No!” of the Father. As Jacques Lacan famously puts it, “woman is defined

²⁰⁰ For a less psychoanalytic interpretation of such hierarchization within lesbianism, see: Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women’s Press, Ltd., 1990), 145.

²⁰¹ See for instance: Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 44.

²⁰² Heller-Nicholas, “Seductive Kindness,” 215.

by a position that I have indicated as ‘not whole’ with respect to phallic *jouissance*.’²⁰³ In other words, womanhood is a psychic, structural position that defies an absolute existence with respect to the phallic law, and can be occupied by some men (“the ones we call mystics”).²⁰⁴ It is, essentially, a position defined by its ability to experience *jouissance* in a less limited fashion than is possible in manhood. This should, then, mark lesbianism as the ultimate opportunity for sexual revolution and abolition of patriarchal psychic law. Unlike heterosexual pleasure, which involves various phallic dynamics, lesbianism should, per Lacan’s theory of female sexuality, be a site of pure eroticism in which the phallus, and therefore the Father, is irrelevant. However, certain remarks of Lacan himself foreshadow the inability of lesbianism, under patriarchy, to ultimately live up to this lofty potential. Elsewhere, Lacan less promisingly seems to hold: that lesbians attempt to make up for their lack of a penis by more diligently providing *jouissance* for their partner; that lesbians’ “supreme interest is in femininity”; and that lesbians essentially imitate men.²⁰⁵ Regardless of the specifics of this analysis and its various problems, we can see that even Lacan himself had a low view of lesbian sexuality’s emancipatory potential. Lacan, perhaps, stands in here for patriarchy’s pessimism toward, and influence on, lesbianism.

This leads us to the relation between patriarchy, lesbian vampire fiction’s omnipresent foregrounding of Sapphic rape, and Batwoman’s run-ins with Nocturna; under patriarchy,

²⁰³ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 7.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 76.

²⁰⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: Norton, 2007), 619.

hierarchization within lesbianism reterritorializes lesbianism as patriarchal. As Heller-Nicholas argues in the above-quoted passage, the figure of the lesbian vampire may be a “monstrous Other” (with potentially progressive or reactionary implications), but is also determined patriarchally. The universal insertion of hierarchy, and therefore exploitation, into even consensual Sapphic vampiric romance and sexuality allows patriarchy to reassert itself within a potentially liberatory context, and even to take advantage of such otherwise subversive spaces. This is precisely why Kate Kane must leave her relationship with Maggie Sawyer and replace it with her ensnarement by Natalia Mitternacht. No identifiable hierarchy exists between Kane and Sawyer, except perhaps Kane’s class, although her status as upper-class seems to have no effect on the middle-class Sawyer. Neither is one partner, at that point, butch and the other femme, which patriarchal conceptions of lesbianism often portray as the necessary norm. Such an egalitarian lesbian relationship cannot exist in a patriarchal context, and above all, it cannot exist within the usually heterosexual-hierarchical context of marriage. Thus, Kane has to leave Sawyer and enter into an extremely hierarchical romance in order to reterritorialize her as subject to patriarchy, regardless of the absence of the phallic law of the Father within her own sexuality. One could say that Mitternacht is the revenge of the phallus upon the previously liberated body of Kane. One way or another, the patriarchal Father will reclaim and retain his dominance over the lesbian subject; the *jouissance* of her romance must be strictly limited by hierarchical dynamics in accordance with heterosexual norms.

Now, having examined how Batwoman/Kate Kane is restricted by various manifestations of the law, it is at last time to turn to how Batwoman’s myriad plotlines progress beyond the law, beginning with Kane’s ability to do things that Batman/Bruce Wayne will not. This question, of what Batman cannot do, is foundational to Batwoman’s origins; as her father asks during a

portrayal of her origin story, “I don’t think you’re asking the right question, Kate. The one question that will define everything we’ll do from this point forward. What can **Batwoman** do that Batman **can’t**?”²⁰⁶ What Batman cannot do is in on the one hand simple, and the other hand, fairly vague: Batman refuses to kill, but he also in some way embodies honor. Batwoman eventually refuses both moral guidelines or traits, adopting at once a freer and darker persona than her cousin, Wayne. As she comments at essentially the end of her storyline thus far, within a lengthy monologue on her sense of ethics and ideals, “And if you must kill, let there have been, truly, no other way.”²⁰⁷ This should provide a stark contrast to Batman’s strict rule against killing, and marks an obvious shift away from Batwoman’s much earlier conflict with Wonder Woman over whether to kill Pegasus. This shift in morality is most obviously on display prior to Kane’s monologue, when she notoriously attempts to kill Clayface/Basil Karlo. A villainous group sends the hitherto redeemed villain Clayface spiraling out of control, gaining power as he wreaks havoc, and the method he had previously used to control himself proves wholly ineffective. Kane’s father having provided her with a rifle holding unique ammunition capable of killing Clayface, she shoots Clayface from afar, and he appears to die. All the relevant characters assume she has killed him, although he did, in fact, manage to survive; regardless, the important point is that Batwoman thinks she has killed her former friend, fully intentionally, and her teammates react accordingly. When Batman confronts her, Batwoman makes a utilitarian argument: “This isn’t even a moral **gray** area. The cure was failing. Within **thirty** seconds he was going to monster out again, and he would have **killed** Cassandra [Cain, a.k.a. Orphan]. What

²⁰⁶ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

²⁰⁷ Bennett, *Batwoman, Volume 3: The Fall of the House of Kane*.

was I supposed to do? Just stand by and watch her get **crushed** to death under thousands of pounds of clay? Would **that** make you feel better?”²⁰⁸ In other words, Clayface’s life was already forfeit; Cassandra Cain’s was not; and Batman only avoids killing in order to feel better about his actions. Further emphasizing her newfound utilitarianism, she remarks thereafter:

Batman had plenty of chances to find another way. I saw what was going to happen. I determined the action that would **save** the most **lives**, and I took it. **Any** police officer or soldier would make the same call and they would be **commended**. I was taught the rules of engagement, and it was time to **engage**.²⁰⁹

Here, Kane is explicitly utilitarian, measuring morality with a simple arithmetic. Her essentially prophesied decision causes Batwoman to stand out sharply against her colleagues in the so-called “Bat-family,” also called in this context the “Gotham Knights,” and the team fragments almost immediately. She explains afterward that she had, in fact, always felt this way, meaning that apparently it was only chance that she had not killed anyone previously, which seems to contradict her behavior during the incident with Pegasus. As she states, “Lethal force should only ever be used as a **last resort**. That’s what I have always believed and what I want to instill here. Nine times out of ten I **agree** with Batman that there’s a better way. Then there’s the **tenth** time.”²¹⁰ This contradiction may be resolved by interpreting her decision concerning Pegasus as circumstantial: his situation was not a “tenth time.” More significantly, this indicates a newly hardened Kane who is certainly capable of much that Batman is not. She has clearly overcome Wayne’s obsessive adherence to his one concrete rule, and thus, her superego has released its hold on her.

²⁰⁸ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

²⁰⁹ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

²¹⁰ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

Batwoman is also willing to fight less honorably than Batman, demonstrating that her goal is much grander than his. In her two physical fights with Wayne, her viciousness and deceptiveness catch him off guard, leading her to victory on both occasions. In the first conflict, she uses explosives to trap him, rather than attempting to beat him in a fight outright.²¹¹ In the second fight, she plays the sound of the model of firearm that took Batman's parents' lives, triggering a trauma reaction and allowing her an easy win.²¹² Why is Batwoman, in these instances, and during the Clayface crisis, willing to break out of her forebear's superegoic influence? This question is likely best answered by a reflection on the two characters' disparate motives. As Batwoman remarks to Batman, "Our missions. They're different. They've **always** been different. We'll always fight them in different ways. You want to end crime. I want to end **war**."²¹³ Given that she refers to *Gevurah* as "war" in her much earlier origin story, as I discuss at length above, and considering the concept of the *shemittoth*, it should be unsurprising that Batwoman's goal is to usher in a utopian *shemittah*. Batman, lacking this grander mystical concern, is willing to focus on fighting crime, which necessitates a certain moral loftiness to not become what he fights; Batwoman, fighting a battle equal parts theological and physical, sees conflict from a much higher perspective. Her fight is too cosmic for smaller concerns to hinder her.

Now, having begun to analyze these conflicts with Batman, it is useful to consider why the two, who are typically allies, can come to blows: in both instances, Batwoman values the safety of her sister, Beth Kane (also known as the supervillain Alice and superhero Red Alice),

²¹¹ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 4: This Blood is Thick*.

²¹² Bennett, *Batwoman, Volume 3: Fall of the House of Kane*.

²¹³ Tynion, *Batman: Rise and Fall of the Batmen, Omnibus*.

over Batman's wellbeing or at least his practices. In the first case, the D.E.O. tasks Batwoman with capturing Batman in order to secure Beth Kane's future.²¹⁴ Of course, Batwoman is not truly an enemy of Batman, so she has a more complex scheme to secure her sister's freedom as well as her cousin's. The events leading to the second fight are more purely moral. Batman wants to send Alice to Arkham Asylum rather than to the foreign hospital where he had previously been staying; Batwoman, however, views Arkham as an unethical option: "She will **die** if she's put in Arkham! She won't receive **treatment** – she'll just be **brutalized** in there – maybe once upon a time, that place was a hospital – but it's a **prison** now. If you put Alice in Arkham – **we will never get Beth back again.**"²¹⁵ So, Batwoman in part escapes Batman's influence through her prioritization of sisterhood. I have argued at length concerning what it is, exactly, that Batwoman can do but Batman cannot, and sisterhood is clearly a value that motivates Batwoman to transcend all other morals and alliances. And it is, in fact, woman-to-woman connections that consistently build Kane as a character, while her relationships with men tend to be of minor import, at best. Her chief consistent companions – friendly, romantic, and familial – tend to be women; her most famous enemies, too, are women, and in one case her closest familial connection, Alice/Beth Kane, is also at times her most well-known enemy. Thus, Batwoman comics promote sisterhood as a way of escaping the grave influence of male repression and law. But have we not seen, also, how the comics reterritorialize lesbian romantic connections into a hierarchical model, thus relieving them of their revolutionary potential? It remains, before

²¹⁴ Williams & Blackman, *Batwoman, Volume 4: This Blood is Thick*.

²¹⁵ Bennett, *Batwoman, Volume 3: Fall of the House of Kane*.

concluding, to indicate how Batwoman's romantic trajectories, in each of her two titles, conclude. Natalia Mitternacht is far from Kate Kane's last flame.

The ultimate freedom from the law, in Batwoman comics, is love itself. Not merely lesbian sexuality, with its hypothetically unlimited *jouissance*, but lesbian *love* in a more encompassing sense. Love, in Batwoman comics, becomes an "unknown" – something beyond what can be captured or predicted, and thus surpasses any binding by law. The final arc of Batwoman's initial title is, tellingly, titled "The Unknowns," and in its conclusion, Batwoman confronts the greatest unknown in her life: whether she can overcome sovereign law in reuniting with Maggie Sawyer. This episode remains somewhat ambiguous in its conclusion, causing the reader to experience some of what Kane herself is feeling while she enters Sawyer's apartment as the text announces, "The End." The final panel in Batwoman's first title is a closed door. As Kane monologues, "I accept the uncertainty of life... the fragility... and you know what? I'm not afraid of the unknown anymore."²¹⁶ The door clicking shut, which holds the reader back from knowing the conclusion of this plot, signifies Kane's willingness to enter into a truly unknown future and give herself over to love beyond the law, regardless of the outcome. Similarly, in the conclusion of her second title and thus of her renewed love plot with Renee Montoya, Kane must become willing to accept what she cannot know. Having been exposed to a drug called "kairos," which allows its users to identify key moments of decision and thus achieve some sense of premonition, Kane sees many flashbacks to her past relationship with Montoya. As Kane begins a lengthy monologue, while in a meeting with Montoya gently indicative of revived feelings:

I saw so much of Renee in the dose of **kairos** that showed me my past... and what comes to me now is what I saw when I turned and gazed down **a different path**... a path **before**

²¹⁶ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

me, that held... everything. ... **Where are you going, Kate Kane? What do you choose?** The past... or the future? Neither. I choose **this**. I choose **now**.”²¹⁷

In other words, Kane rejects the certainty of the past, and the comfort of attempting to predict what is to come; she accepts, once again, the absence of clarity and knowledge. Again, it is “the unknowns” that allow Kane to remove herself from the law, returning to a life in which her romance is no longer bound by hierarchy.

Slavoj Zizek, similarly, discusses love as the true opposition to law. As he argues, the opposition of law to sin or transgression is not an absolute one: “The gap that separates Law and sin is not a real difference: their truth is their mutual implication or confusion – Law generates sin and feeds upon it, one can never draw a clear line of separation between the two.”²¹⁸ Law is what makes possible its transgression. Without the law, there is no sin. Thus, the two are inseparable, two sides of the same coin. As we have seen in *Batwoman*, however, love does allow a contradiction with the law. Zizek writes, “It is only with the couple Law/love that we attain a real difference: these two moments are radically separated, they are not ‘mediated,’ one is not the form of appearance of its opposite.”²¹⁹ This “real difference” allows for an actual dialectical relationship. *Batwoman* comics, through their various portrayals of law and love, clarify and further Zizek’s point. Love is what allows Kane to step outside a life bound by law. It is, in fact, her love for her sister that directly snaps her out from Nocturna’s hypnosis.²²⁰ Love contradicts law.

²¹⁷ Bennett, *Batwoman, Volume 3: Fall of the House of Kane*.

²¹⁸ Slavoj Zizek, *Living in the End Times* (London & New York: Verso, 2018), 153

²¹⁹ Zizek, *Living in the End Times*, 153

²²⁰ Andreyko, *Batwoman, Volume 6: The Unknowns*.

In some ways, the apparently bewildering constellation of Kabbalah, law, vampires, and lesbianism is unsurprising. Kabbalah often appears patriarchal to the core; however, through its figure of the Shekhinah, or exiled feminine aspect of God, it entails Judaism's potent instantiation of the feminine within the divine.²²¹ Kabbalah features the concept of *shemmitoth*, and according to some kabbalists, we live in the *shemittah* of *Gevurah*, the aspect of God signifying harsh justice. Thus, law firmly enters the equation; vampire literature is highly rule-bound in several ways, and lesbianism is both transcendent of, and bound by, patriarchal law. These concepts and narratives, then, are not so distant from one another, and in contemporary Batwoman comics, they come together intimately and inseparably. Clashing and complementing, they may appear to separate, but always return to enrich and enliven one another. As we have seen, Batwoman comics features prominent and significant kabbalistic symbolism, indicative of Kate Kane's connection to *Gevurah*, and therefore a harsh and imperfect law. This kabbalistic connection clarifies and complicates Batwoman's sometimes confusing plot and visual dynamics, and highlights the various ways in which Batwoman is bound by the law, from sovereign law, to the superego, to the phallic law within sexuality. But in addition to explicating these restrictive dynamics, I also hope to have shown that Batwoman comics indicate several routes to liberation, not just the outlines of oppression, through rejecting Batman's overbearing law, through sisterhood, and through an acceptance of "the unknown" in romance. My argument here reaches its close. However, I hope that further, in the preceding strands of analysis and contention, to have demonstrated not only my direct argument, but also the significance of Kate

²²¹ Arthur Green, "Bride, Spouse, Daughter: Images of the Feminine in Classical Jewish Sources," in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 254.

Kane's Jewish heritage to her portrayal and plot. So-called intersectional analyses would be well-served, in future analyses of characters within DC Comics, by no longer failing to pay attention to Judaism as an element of identity. Kate Kane is far from the only prominent Jewish character within the pages of current DC Comics, and the ignorance or even erasure of her and others' Jewish identity is not only a failure of some vague sense of respect, but also a failure of analysis itself. And of course, all these elements of Batwoman comics – Kabbalah, lesbianism, vampirism, law – are significant beyond what any one interpretation can capture. I can only hope that future research will tease out the innumerable other factors that make Kate Kane one of the most dynamic and fascinating characters in contemporary comics.

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