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# "What am I to do about you? I fear you may be... quite mad:" an exploration of the mad superheroine on the comic book page

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“What am I to do About You? I Fear You May be...Quite Mad:”  
An Exploration of the Mad Superheroine on the Comic Book Page

A Senior Thesis in English by Cynthia Bonacum

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## Introduction

She is a military school dropout and disciple of Batman. She is a refugee from Eastern Europe, the child of a Holocaust survivor. She is a twelve-year-old giant hunter, a murderous ex-nun, a lovesick psychiatrist, an unpopular high school student. Sometimes she is two people at once, violently fractured by some trauma or loss, unable to control her power or her mind. She is a mother, a killer, a hero, an Angel of Death, Athena, Ophelia, and Kali. Since her creation in the 1930s, the woman on the comic book page has been defined by a complex web of tropes, desires, anxieties, and expectations. In this piece, I seek to examine, elaborate, and illustrate one startlingly common “type” of comic book woman: The Mad Superheroine. Why does power for female comic book characters so often seem to necessitate madness? What can these chaotic and destructive women illuminate about the comic book as a medium of storytelling?

Before I delve any further into this question, it is first necessary to define the terms and vocabulary I will be using to create my argument. Perhaps the most important term to define is “mad,” since it is the descriptor by which I am selecting heroines and stories to analyze. I do not, of course, purport to define what madness is in a medical sense, but rather to define how it operates on the comic book page. When I say that a superheroine is “mad,” I mean that her mind and behavior are positioned as “other”- chaotic, unknowable, and dangerous. Madness manifests itself in superheroines in many different ways- the Mad Superwoman may be traumatized or grief-stricken, repress her memories, engage in violence towards herself and others, display multiple personalities, suffer from depression or

schizophrenia, hallucinate, show fits of rage, weep uncontrollably, be voraciously sexual, or be all of the above. However her madness shows itself, (and it is always visible) it is always framed as outside of the safe “normal” realms of logic and rationality.

The deep gendering of this “safe,” “rational,” realm of which I speak as male brings me to the next term I must define: “the patriarchal imagination.” This imagination’s positioning of itself as the rational norm on the comic book page creates the mechanism by which female characters are made “mad” and “other.” When I refer to the “patriarchal imagination,” I am talking about the various fantasies and expectations with which men imagine women, and how these imaginings manifest on the page. I am not referring to the mind of any individual man, but rather the culturally constructed notion of “masculinity” and the most common/commonly recognized male anxieties, fantasies, etc. that comic books were written to appeal to. Because it was created largely by and for men, the comic book itself can be read as an extension of the male imagination, defined by its desires. Thus, a woman on the comic book page can be examined as a projection of the male psyche that wrote her into being. She exists in a male imaginary space. The options for what/who she can be are limited to what that patriarchal psyche can (safely) imagine her to be without putting itself in jeopardy. I do not wish to claim that male writers are incapable of writing in a feminist manner, but rather to illuminate the ways in which the recurring Mad Superheroine “type” can be seen as both a creation and a device of the patriarchal psyche.

The goal of this project is ultimately to anatomize the most ubiquitous characteristics of the Mad Superheroine character type and the patriarchal fantasies

and anxieties that it enacts. I aim to illuminate the processes and mechanisms by which the patriarchal imagination creates the Mad Superwoman character. I see the patriarchal imagination on the comic book page as a sort of machine, telling the same kinds of stories over and over again and manufacturing mad superwomen characters in perpetuity. In this thesis I will break this patriarchal machinery down into its component parts and analyze how they work to “other” the superheroine’s body and mind and to reinforce patriarchal assumptions.

I have broken my exploration of the Mad Superwoman into three chapters. In my first chapter, I will investigate the concept of the superhero origin story as it relates to Mad Superheroines. This chapter will focus primarily on trauma, since I have found it to be the defining characteristic of the Mad Superwoman’s origin story. I will break down the various “types” of trauma that the patriarchal imagination assigns to these origin stories and the effects that they have on the female characters who experience them. Thus, this chapter will also be about the splitting and fragmentation of identity and selfhood, as that is so often the end result of these traumatic origin stories. I will look at numerous traumatized Mad Superwoman stories and investigate how they use the model of split personalities/symptoms of schizophrenia to gender power and madness on the comics page.

In my second chapter, I will hone in on the patriarchal imagination as the driving force in Mad Superheroine stories. I will highlight the extreme ambivalence towards women that I see in this imagination and the ways in which it projects its often contradictory fears and desires onto the Mad Superwoman. I argue that, for the patriarchal mind, the Mad Superwoman is an object of both fetishization and condemnation, and thus also an object of great confusion and ambivalence. I will

also examine how the patriarchal imagination views female sexuality and uses Mad Superwoman stories to make that sexuality out to be something dangerous and unknowable. Finally, I will examine how the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse of “female hysteria” plays out in Mad Superwoman stories. The word “hysteria” itself indicates the womb as the source of madness, a madness that is therefore gendered female. The “hysterical” woman also has a specific aesthetic attached to her madness, through which she is both pathologized and fetishized. I will examine photographs and writings about “female hysteria” from the Victorian period to identify the tropes of this particular aesthetic and how they resurface in depictions of Mad Superwomen on the comics page.

In my final chapter, I will examine a few stories that “write back” to the patriarchal imagination. By “write back” I mean that these stories break the Mad Superwoman “molds” set in place by the patriarchal mind. They work to reconstitute the Mad Superwoman identity on the comic book page outside of what the patriarchal imagination dictates what it must be. I will highlight the aspects of these narratives that resist the patriarchal machinery that I outline in my first two chapters. I will break down the specific patriarchal tropes and assumptions that these works subvert and the particular methods of reversal and resistance that they use to do so.

I would also like to say here that there is (regrettably) a lot that I will not be able to examine about women, power, and madness in the limited space of this thesis. The comic book genre, having already existed in the modern sense since the 1930s, is vast and ever-expanding and I thus cannot cover every aspect of Mad Superheroine narratives that I would like to. For the purposes of my thesis, I will be considering the Mad Superwoman as a single category of “otherness” to the

patriarchal imagination. While certainly course holds true, it is also of course true that the race, class, and lgbtq identities, of Mad Superwoman characters also effect how they are depicted on the comic book page. Were I writing a book on the Mad Superheroine, I would certainly include all of these considerations. However, it is nonetheless valuable to proceed in our analysis of the Mad Superheroine, even as we understand that it may be a somewhat incomplete one.

## Chapter 1: Trauma and The Origin Story

In this first chapter, I wish to start at the beginning. That is to say, with the origin story. The superhero origin story is undoubtedly an essential component of the comic book medium, as a device for creating and explaining the Mad Superheroine type. I have noticed a troubling pattern in the origin stories of this character type and, indeed, of female superheroes in general. A vast majority of these female origin stories involve extreme trauma and violence. At first, this may sound like an overly narrow statement. After all, many of the most iconic origin stories of male superheroes involve traumatic violence. Think of Batman, who witnessed his parents' murder as a child. Or Spiderman, who lost both of his parents and saw his beloved uncle gunned down on the street. Superman is the last survivor of a destroyed planet. However, I have found that these violent and traumatic origin stories affect the mental states of male and female superheroes differently. In superwomen, trauma often leads to a fracturing of the self. There is a fascinating category of Mad Superwomen who display dual personalities tumultuously struggling against each other, and symptoms of schizophrenia. For some of them, the disorder is explicitly named. For others, it is just a part of their super "persona." For all of these women, fascinatingly, their trauma-induced "madness" is the very source of their superpowers. This is what seems to me to separate the traumatized superheroines from their male counterparts. Certainly, many male heroes have been galvanized to action by their traumatic pasts. However, for these women, trauma does not only create madness or a reason to fight. In the comics genre, trauma endows the traumatized woman with supernatural power. In other words, she cannot be "super"



without her trauma and subsequent madness. As we have already established, the comic book page is ruled by the patriarchal mind, a mind which imagines power in deeply gendered terms. While male power is traditionally conceived of as “reasonable,” defined by a “rational” mind, female power is traditionally portrayed as mystical, threatening and, chaotic. I feel that the Mad Superheroine type, more than any other category of comic book character, exposes this gendering plainly. In this chapter, I will use the Mad Superheroine to illuminate the gendering of the origin story and the subsequent gendering of power on the comic book page.

Fundamentally, Clark Kent is *really* Superman and Batman is *really* Bruce Wayne. Whether they are fighting crime or living anonymously, their personalities remain fairly unchanging. Many Mad Superheroines don’t have this single “true self,” accompanied by an “alter ego.” The two versions of selfhood they possess have very different characteristics, appearances, and personalities. Several female heroes have even been canonically diagnosed with schizophrenia. I have chosen the characters Rose/Thorn, Aurora (Jeanne-Marie Beaubier), and Kate Kane (Batwoman) to illustrate this fractured personality “type” of female power as imagined by the patriarchal mind.

I have chosen Aurora to open my discussion of the gendering of trauma and power because, in addition to having two personalities of her own, she also has a male counterpart in the form of her twin brother, North Star (Jean-Paul Beaubier). The different ways in which the two siblings are characterized illuminates how the superpowered mind is gendered in the comic book genre. Here, I must of course address a seeming contradiction in my argument about split personalities and superheroes. After all, dual identities are key in stories of male superheroes. Of

course, there are some male heroes with only one identity, such as Thor, but many of the oldest and most iconic heroes all have a “secret identity.” The possession of this “secret identity” (Peter Parker, Tony Stark, etc) provides male superheroes with the resources they need to fight crime effectively. Peter Parker’s job as a photographer at the Daily Bugle allows him the pretense to be at crime scenes or “investigate” around the city without arousing suspicion. Tony Stark’s position as the CEO of Stark Industries guarantees the Avengers access to high tech weaponry and money. Stark’s own engineering knowledge is what enabled him to make his famous suit in the first place. However, in order for heroes to reap the benefits of their secret identities, both identities must possess one single, integrated mind. Unlike the Mad Superwomen, these male heroes are able to navigate their two identities at will, without fracturing their psyches in the process.

Aurora’s origin story is deeply traumatic, in typical Mad Superwoman fashion. She has endured the loss of both her parents, who died in a car accident during her childhood. This loss of parents is significant, as it is a ubiquitous element of Mad Superheroine origin stories (and superhero origin stories in general), but I will return to this later. After her parents’ deaths, Aurora is separated from her twin brother and sent away to a boarding school run by nuns. At age 13, she attempts suicide by jumping off the roof of the school, but instead discovers that she can fly. The school’s headmistress, believing Aurora’s mutant powers to be blasphemous, beats and severely punishes her. This violent abuse triggers a fracturing of Aurora’s identity into two parts: Jeanne-Marie and Aurora.

After her dual identities emerge, she is recruited into Alpha Flight, a team of superheroes working for the Canadian government, of which her brother is also a

member. Since her first appearance in 1984, Aurora has appeared in numerous series and had stories with everyone from Wolverine to the Avengers. However, her dissociative identities leave her unpredictable and prone to chaotic outbreaks. At one point, she is institutionalized by the government, the combination of her powers and mental instability making her too much of a “threat.” The official Marvel Comics database describes her as having a “damaged mind.”<sup>1</sup> Though Jeanne-Marie and Aurora are constantly warring, it is Aurora who actually possesses supernatural power. While Jeanne-Marie is bookish and meek, Aurora is “uninhibited”<sup>2</sup> and has the abilities of flight, healing, and super-speed. In a 2002 story, the Jeanne-Marie personality emerges while Aurora is battling the supervillain Mauvais. Unable to fight like the superpowered Aurora, Jeanne-Marie cowers in fear, fails to defeat Mauvais, and is subsequently institutionalized.<sup>3</sup> Her traumatic origin story makes her mad, but (crucially), without madness, she is not a superhero. In fact, Jeanne-Marie often has no memory at all of Aurora’s escapades.<sup>4</sup>

Her brother, Jean-Paul Beaubier/Northstar, has a rather different path to heroism and seems to enact a hyper-masculine patriarchal fantasy. Though he endures the same traumatic loss as his sister, he is placed in foster care, rather than sent away to school. Instead of attempting suicide as a teenager, he begins stealing. He gets into “trouble,” but he is an active participant, rather than a victim like Aurora. Northstar eventually discovers he has the power of super speed. While his sister is attempting to suppress her “superhero self,” Jean-Paul smoothly incorporates his

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<sup>1</sup> "Aurora." *Marvel Universe Wiki*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> "Wolverine Vol. 2 #172." *Marvel Database*.

<sup>4</sup> "Aurora." *Marvel Universe Wiki*.

powers into his own life and uses his super speed to win an Olympic gold medal in skiing and become “famous and wealthy.”<sup>5</sup> When he joins Alpha Flight, he takes on the name Northstar and revels in his newfound identity. Unlike Aurora, Northstar’s identity, despite his two personas, remains intact. He has the power to be Northstar or Jean-Paul whenever he chooses. In a strikingly illustrative panel, after the siblings reunite and the Aurora personality emerges, she tells her brother “I am Aurora, not Jeanne-Marie!”<sup>6</sup> Evoking the classic trope of the female mind as unknowable to the patriarchal imagination, Northstar responds: “You are a Chinese puzzle sister. You are boxes within boxes, and each is more perplexing than then the last...Northstar and Jean-Paul are one and the same... Why must Aurora and Jeanne-Marie treat each other as strangers?” When Aurora dismisses him and flies off, he remarks to himself: “What am I to do about you? I fear you may be...quite mad.”<sup>7</sup>

The siblings’ postures on this page are also revealing. In one panel Northstar flies straight ahead, arms outstretched, his body forming a perfect horizontal. Aurora’s posture looks almost as though she is sitting in the air. Her arms are folded across her chest and her long hair whips around her face. If you took her out of the sky, she would look like the stereotypical image of a petulant young woman, with her pouty expression and closed off posture. She also has wild and unkempt hair, a classic signifier of the madwoman (about which I will say more in my second chapter). Furthermore, Aurora is flying backwards in the panel, moving in the same direction as her brother, but turning to face him. She is exercising her superpowers, but she is doing it “wrong.” This panel provides us with Northstar as a sort of

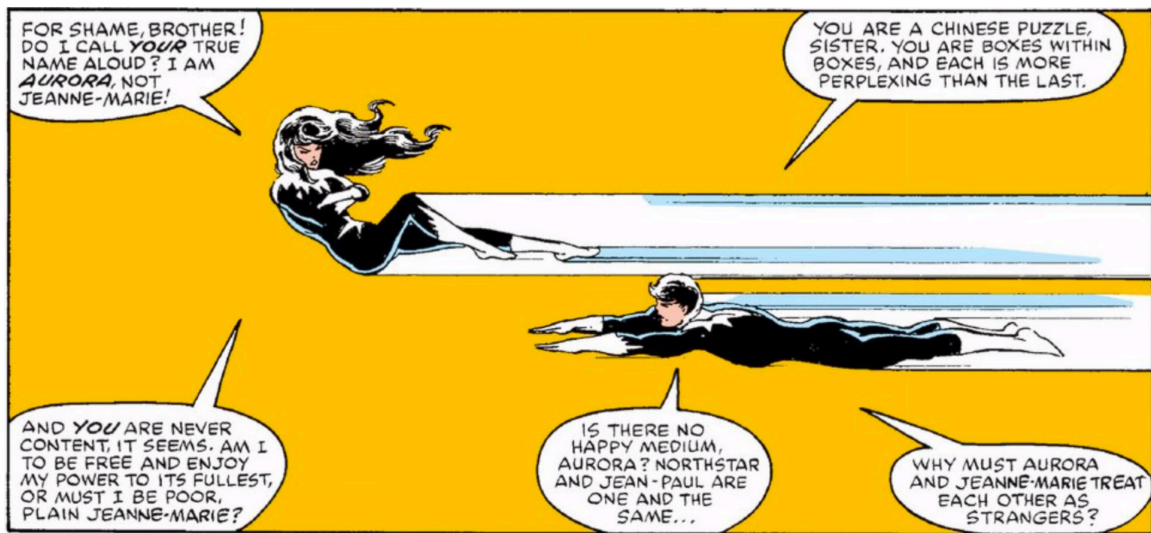
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<sup>5</sup> "Northstar." *Marvel Universe Wiki*.

<sup>6</sup> Byrne, 25

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

paradigm of a superhero who is “correct,” “neat,” “sane,” etc. His presence lays plain Aurora’s “deviance.” By aligning the siblings with “correctness” and “wrongness,” “sanity,” and “insanity,” in this way, the story presents a powerful gendering of the superpowered mind. Furthermore, because both siblings have endured the same traumatic loss, they form a kind of “twin study” of trauma in the comic book genre, demonstrating that, while male heroes can remain “sane” after trauma, superwomen do not. The differences between Aurora and Northstar in this issue illustrate that the mechanism through which trauma on the comic book page operates is a clearly gendered one.



Aurora and Northstar

The DC Heroine Rose/Thorn has a similar story. Though the character has been rebooted multiple times, in every version she has suffered the loss of either one or both of her parents. In her first incarnation by DC comics, Rose Canton was a mild-mannered botanist by day with an evil second personality called Thorn. Thorn gained superhuman plant-controlling powers through the sap of a magical “jungle root.” In

the end, Rose commits suicide to prevent Thorn from harming her two children. Her two selves are constantly locked in a struggle for control and do not co-exist peacefully like Bruce Wayne and Batman. The story troublingly leads us to conclude that the only way to stabilize her fragmented identity and its “mad,” “chaotic” power is through death.

In 2012, Rose/Thorn received one final reboot, once again as a young woman traumatized by her father’s murder. This single-issue story presents Rose/Thorn with more of the modern vocabulary of schizophrenia and trauma. For instance, the issue is titled “Trigger.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike the previous versions of the character, this Rose has no memory of her father’s murder. Only Thorn is capable of recalling the traumatic events of her childhood, as Rose has completely repressed them in classic Freudian fashion. Thus, Thorn becomes the embodiment of Rose’s subconscious and an outlet through which her repressed trauma can be expressed. While Rose is a well-behaved high school student who wears unicorn pajamas to bed, Thorn is a wild party girl with violent and sexual tendencies. Rose is only made aware of her second personality when she wakes up covered in blood and receives a video message from Thorn. The video message triggers Rose’s memories of her father’s death and she joins Thorn’s quest to avenge her father.

Freud would likely remark on the traumatic event that caused Rose/Thorn’s split personality. According to Freud, the “murder of the primal father”<sup>9</sup> is the “ur-trauma,” the trauma of all traumas. It also seems a particularly common trauma in the manufacturing of madwomen. We turn to Ophelia, once again, (perhaps an “ur-

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<sup>8</sup> National Comics: Rose and Thorn Vol. 1 #1 (2012)

<sup>9</sup> Fuller, 56

madwoman”) who was pushed over the edge into true “madness” only after the death of her father, Polonius. Why might this be? Here, it is helpful to turn to Freud as a voice of the patriarchal imagination. Freud would argue that it is the strength of the woman’s attachment to her father that makes his loss so traumatic. In his essay, “Female Sexuality”<sup>10</sup> Freud maps out the psychological development process of the female child. According to Freud the mother is the young girl’s first “love-object.” However, as the girl develops sexually, her “love-object” becomes the father. As Freud puts it: “as she changes in sex, so must the sex of the love-object change.”<sup>11</sup> The father then becomes the center of the young girl’s world. Thus, his loss during her childhood would inevitably be extremely traumatic.

A close reading of *Trigger* reveals still more Freudian underpinnings. The comic opens with a series of ambiguous partial-images. A child’s toy magic wand. Glittering fairy wings. Long hair cascading in the wind. Over these images is text: “Someone is yelling...Not yelling. Screaming. No. This isn’t happening now. This has already happened. Why can’t I remember?”<sup>12</sup> This page seems a direct translation of Freud’s theories of trauma and repression. In 1915, Freud explained repression as “turning away” from painful memories and keeping them “at a distance, from the conscious,”<sup>13</sup> pushing them down into the subconscious where they are no longer consciously recalled. It is, simply put, a “flight from pain.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Freud

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<sup>10</sup> Freud, 88

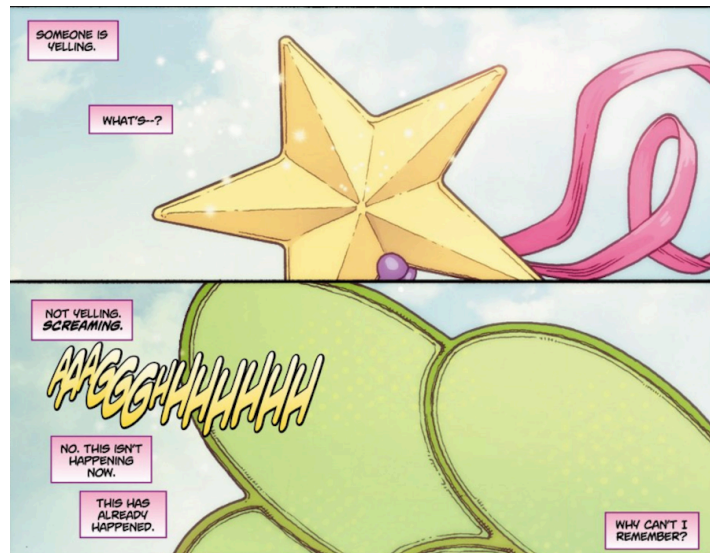
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 91

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, 1

<sup>13</sup> Boag, 74

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

posited that adult neuroses could be traced back to childhood repression.<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, it becomes clear that the model of trauma used in “Trigger” is Freudian.



Rose's suppressed memories

However, these flashes of fairy wings and suppressed screams reveal not only Freudian influences, but also the ubiquitous influence of the patriarchal imagination (which, of course, Freud is bound up in). This first page, which articulates Rose's repressed memories is a distinctly patriarchal imagining of a woman's trauma. The comic presents a classic image of an idyllic female childhood. In a flashback, we see Rose as a young girl. She rides on her father's shoulders, dressed in the fairy costume seen in fragments on page 1. She asks her father: "why were you and that man yelling?" He tells her: "fairies don't need to worry about things like that."<sup>16</sup> The patriarchal imagination uses this "fairy" imagery to throw the violence that later intrudes on Rose's life into sharper relief. Her world goes from one of fairy wands to gunshots and screams. This intrusion of violence on the hyper-feminine is so

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, 31



unthinkable to the woman that she then inevitably becomes traumatized and goes mad. The patriarchal imagining of women as innately frail is common and pervasive. Hamlet (who, notably, gets to be “melancholic” while Ophelia is “mad”) himself declares: “frailty, thy name is woman.” The 19<sup>th</sup> Century “Cult of True Womanhood” produced numerous guides and handbooks for women, instructing them that their ultimate duty was to remain by “[their] own fireside,”<sup>17</sup> creating a tranquil home. Thus, when violence intrudes on the woman’s “natural state” of domesticity, the patriarchal mind will of course imagine that she must lose her mind.

It is also interesting to note that, while Rose in her fluffy pajamas is decidedly un-sexualized, Thorn uses her powers of seduction to get close to a man who once knew her father. This further underscores a Freudian-patriarchal reading of Rose/Thorn, as Thorn can be seen as articulating the libidinous and violent urges repressed by her counterpart, thereby enacting the patriarchal fear of feminine “excess.” Here, we encounter a contradiction. How do we bridge the gap between Hamlet’s “frailty, thy name is woman” line and the writings of 17<sup>th</sup> Century hysteria scholar Robert Burton, who wrote that all women are in possession of an internal “fire,” which can grow dangerous if not “tamed” by a man?<sup>18</sup> In the patriarchal realm of the comic book, are women “frail” creatures, easily shattered by violence, or are they a threatening source of that violence itself? I believe the answer to be that they are both. The patriarchal imagination can’t seem to make up its mind about women, and thus expresses a curious dual attitude towards them. Perhaps this is the heart of the reason why we see so many fractured/split women on the comic book page. If the

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<sup>17</sup> Welter, 162

<sup>18</sup> Schiesari, 14

imagination that rules that page cannot make up its mind about women, women in the comic book genre must become two things at once, giving rise to “split personality” heroines like Rose/Thorn and Aurora. However, there is one more mechanism of doubling employed by the patriarchal imagination that must be explored: twinning. Of course, Aurora and Northstar are twins, but, as I have already discussed in this chapter, Northstar’s presence mainly acts as a foil to throw Aurora’s “madwoman-ness” into sharper relief and provide an example of the sane, masculine superhero mind. However, the patriarchal imagination also employs twinning to articulate its fears, desires, and ambivalence towards women.

To illustrate this, I have chosen the example of Kate Kane (a.k.a. Batwoman) and her twin sister. Unlike Rose/Thorn, Kate Kane (aka Batwoman) does not display schizophrenic symptoms/multiple personalities within herself. However, her origin story (as told in *Batwoman: Elegy*) shows her to be a fragment of sorts all on her own. In multiple flashbacks, we see that Kate grew up with an identical twin sister, Elizabeth. They operate as essentially one single unit, two halves of one whole self. During their childhood, the sisters seem to form one integrated being. They go everywhere together and wear their red hair the same. Their identities/selves are further fused when they pretend to be each other or are mistaken for one another. When they learn they are moving to Belgium for their father’s job, Elizabeth tells Kate: “We’ll always be together.”<sup>19</sup> In this panel, the girls are literally mirror images of each other. They are drawn in side profile looking at each other, the exact same expression on their identical faces (see below). However, though their faces are identical, this panel does foreshadow their impending fracture. While Kate’s hat has

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<sup>19</sup> Rucka, 80

a red band, Beth's hat is pastel blue and purple. Red is an extremely important color for Kate as Batwoman: her gloves, boots, and belt are red, as is her cape. Most importantly, the bat symbol emblazoned on her chest is red. As Alice, Beth wears an Elizabethan-style collar in exactly the same colors as her hat in this panel. This implies that maybe they were doomed from the beginning, that their fracturing from each other was inevitable. This seems to suggest that, for the patriarchal mind, fragmentation is an inherent quality of the feminine.



Kate and Elizabeth Kane

As in so many other Mad Superwoman origin stories, Kate and Elizabeth's fragmentation is triggered by a traumatic event. Kate, Beth, and their mother are kidnapped by terrorists. Their mother is murdered and Kate believes that Beth has been killed as well. From this moment on, the twins are separated and Kate starts down the path that will lead her to become Batwoman. She joins the military, but is expelled for "homosexual conduct."<sup>20</sup> Unable to fight for justice in the army, Kate becomes a vigilante. She brands herself with the bat symbol so that everyone knows "what side [she is] on."<sup>21</sup>

The fragmented twins reunite when Beth returns in the form of an insane cult leader who fashions herself after Lewis Carroll's Alice. She disguises herself in bright

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 135

makeup, blonde curls, and extravagant outfits, so much so that, at first, Kate does not recognize her. The two fight bitterly until they end up battling on the wing of an airplane. Beth/Alice falls and hangs off the side of the plane. Kate grabs Beth/Alice's hand who then plunges her knife into Kate's arm, telling her "you have our father's eyes<sup>22</sup>" before plummeting to her death. With this line, Beth both reveals her identity and reinforces the Freudian-patriarchal view that female madness is inextricably linked to the woman's attachment to her father. Kate and Beth can be compared to Rose and Thorn- one "good" self and one "bad" self. Unlike Rose and Thorn, Kate and Beth are actually two people, but the "sane self" and "bad self" split remains. Beth seems to know and embrace her role as a madwoman. She dresses like a clown and speaks entirely in lines from Lewis Carroll's works. And, she (essentially) commits suicide while wearing white, hearkening back once again to Ophelia.



Kate and Elizabeth/Alice

The performance of gender on the comic book page also comes into play in the fragmentation of Kate and Elizabeth. Though they can be read as two halves of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 80

the same self, they (like Northstar and Aurora) respond to their shared trauma in different ways. Beth follows the usual Mad Superwoman path, losing her mind and becoming a madwoman. After she is fractured from Kate, her identity undergoes yet another split into Beth and Alice. Kate's selfhood also splits into two parts, Batwoman and Kate, but she retains the single, integrated mind typical of male heroes navigating their secret identities. Once again, we encounter the patriarchal imagination contradicting itself. Taking the sisters' gender performances into account can provide some answers. As, previously discussed, after her trauma Beth seems to become hyper-feminine, embracing a girly Victorian style and elaborate makeup. Kate, on the other hand, ventures into the traditionally masculine realms of the military and, later, vigilante crime-fighting. Having lost their joint sense of self, each sister styles herself after a different icon of gender performance. Kate Kane takes after Batman, a paradigm of masculine power. Beth becomes Alice Liddell, the epitome of frilly feminine innocence. Perhaps it is Kate's more masculine performance that allows her to retain her sanity. Beth falls victim to the patriarchal "law of the land," in which female comic books characters who show empowered femininity must also therefore be mad.

However, though Beth styles herself after the "frail" Victorian woman, this does not mean that she is not also "super." She is every bit as powerful as Kate- she wields knives and machine guns and guiltlessly kills her henchmen when they displease her. Once again, we see trauma as a source of power for female characters. Neither sister is a superwoman without their shared traumatic experience. Kate and Elizabeth are unlike every other Mad Superwoman discussed in this chapter because, while their shared trauma does create a "good" self and a

“bad” self, it *does not* create a “weak” self and a “super” self. Jeanne-Marie is not powerful, while Aurora is. But *both* Kate and Elizabeth become superwomen as a result of trauma. I argue that they are allowed to be thus because they are twins, as opposed to one individual. When they are together, they are not powerful. It is only when they are split up that they are able to become “super.” This expresses a patriarchal need to keep women apart—you can only be empowered as a woman if you are cut off from your “sisters.”

While all of the Mad Superwomen I have examined thus far in this chapter have similar origin stories, the machinery of the patriarchal imagination still operates on female characters who have endured different types of trauma. In addition to the prevalence of the “violent loss of parents” narrative, sexual violence also appears in Mad Superwoman origin stories with unsettling ubiquity. The last Mad Superwoman I will be focusing on in this chapter is Stained Glass Scarlet, (a.k.a. Scarlet Fasinera) an antagonist of Marvel hero Moon Knight, who appeared intermittently in several Moon Knight storylines throughout the 1980s and 90s. While she is undoubtedly a Mad Superwoman, the trauma by which she becomes one is different from that of Aurora, Rose/Thorn, and the Kane sisters. Scarlet became a Mad Superwoman not through a single violent loss, but through experiencing regular sexual abuse for a period of many years. Sexual violence, like the violent death of a parent, comes up again and again in the origin stories of female superheroes, from Storm (Ororo Monroe) to Ms. Marvel (Carol Danvers). However, the reason that I have chosen to focus on Stained Glass Scarlet in particular is that she presents an illustrative counterpoint to an iconic male hero- Spiderman.

In an oft-forgotten 1985 story (created by Marvel in partnership with the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse), Peter Parker reveals that he was sexually abused during his childhood.<sup>23</sup> The story begins when Spiderman overhears his neighbor, a young boy named Tony, telling his babysitter: “Leave me alone! Please! I don’t want to do anything like that!”<sup>24</sup> Peter then dons his Spiderman costume and takes Tony out of his apartment. When Tony explains to Peter that his babysitter had been touching him inappropriately, Peter tells him the story of his own childhood abuse. In flashbacks, we see that Peter Parker was a lonely child, made fun of by other boys for prioritizing school over sports. While studying at the library, Peter is approached by an older boy named Skip, and the two quickly become friends. Taking advantage of Peter’s innocence and need of friendship, Skip begins sexually abusing Peter. Finally, Peter stands up to Skip and tells his Aunt and Uncle about the abuse.

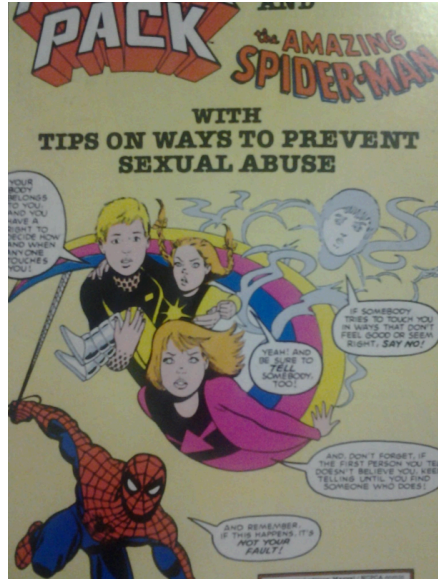
However, despite his sexual trauma, Peter Parker is not fractured, broken, or mad. He retains his single, integrated mind and is able to gain healthy perspective on what happened to him. At the end of the comic, he says aloud: “it wasn’t until...Tony’s similar experience that I finally truly realized that what happened back then really wasn’t my fault! It really wasn’t my fault!”<sup>25</sup> His trauma does not cause him to repress his memories, to fragment his identity, or to become violent towards others. In fact, he uses his traumatic origin story to help encourage Tony (and young Marvel readers) to seek help and speak out about childhood sexual abuse.

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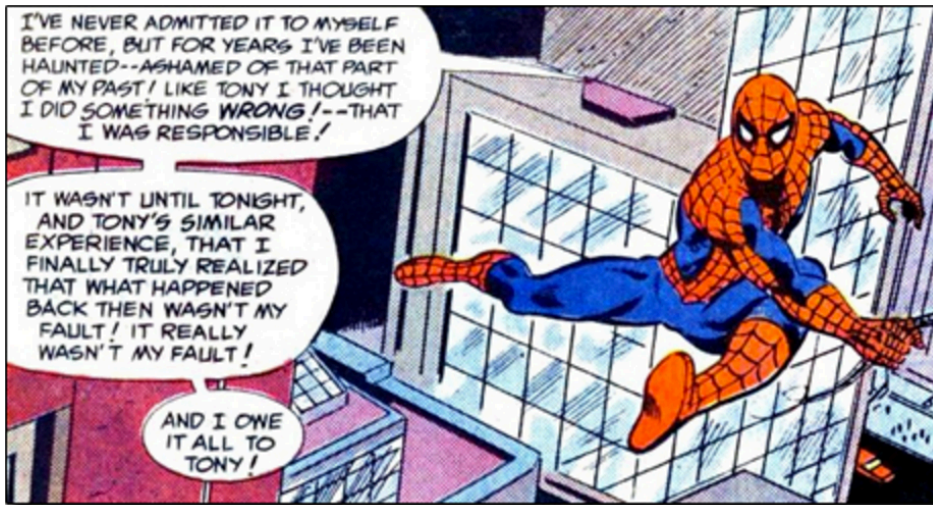
<sup>23</sup> Gerner, Peter. “Spider-Man Unfolds Web of Child Abuse.”

<sup>24</sup> Allen and Salicrup, 2

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 8



A page from “Secrets” with advice to readers



The last page of “Secrets.”

While Peter Parker is swinging through New York City healthily processing his trauma, Scarlet Fasinera is living in isolation in an abandoned church, haunted by nightmares and hallucinations. In a 1991 multi-issue Moon Knight story entitled “Scarlet Redemption,” we learn Scarlet’s tormented origin story– she was repeatedly physically and sexually abused by her father as a child. To free herself from the abuse, the young Scarlet murdered her father by setting his bed on fire. She then



swore off men, growing up to become a nun. While serving as a nun, she met and fell in love with a New York City crime boss named Vince Fasinera, who abused her in the same manner as her father. Scarlet and Vince had a son, Joe, who became a criminal after his father was killed by the police. Joe left home and Scarlet, mad and penniless, began living in an abandoned church, wreaking violent revenge on all those who she believes may have led her son to a life of crime.

On one of her violent trips through the streets of Brooklyn, Scarlet attacks a friend of Moon Knight, bringing her into contact with the masked hero. She then kidnaps Frenchie, Moon Knight's best friend, and holds him hostage on the Brooklyn bridge. Moon Knight saves Frenchie, but the frenzied Scarlet, referencing her use of fire as a child to end her pain, decides that the whole world "must burn."<sup>26</sup> She then begins randomly firebombing throughout New York City. Moon Knight's attempts to stop her ultimately lead the two back to the top of the Brooklyn Bridge. Scarlet begs Moon knight to end her suffering once and for all and kill her. When he refuses, she throws herself off of the bridge.

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<sup>26</sup> DeMatteis, 30



Stained Glass Scarlet

Comparing Scarlet's story to Spiderman's clearly exposes how the patriarchal mind genders trauma on the comic book page. While Spiderman is able to heal from his trauma and process his pain, Scarlet is forever "Stained" by her abuse. As with all the other heroines discussed in this chapter, Scarlet is not a superhero without her trauma. Without having first been "Stained," she could never have become "Stained Glass Scarlet." While Peter Parker chose to end his abuse through the "logical" and non-violent method of telling his aunt and uncle, Scarlet freed herself from her abuser by murdering him and fleeing to a life of celibacy.

In the contrast between Spiderman and Stained Glass Scarlet, I see the gendering of sexual trauma on the comic book page as operating in two distinct steps. Firstly, the male superhero is able to survive sexual abuse without losing his sanity, while the female superhero becomes a madwoman as a result. Secondly, the male superhero is able to constitute a “super” identity for himself outside of his trauma. The famous radioactive spider bite caused Peter Parker’s superpowers, not his trauma. The female hero is unable to be “super” without trauma and thus her super identity becomes inextricable from what happened to her (hence Scarlet’s superhero name literally including the word “Stained.”)

I have also chosen to end this chapter with a discussion of Scarlet, because she, perhaps more than any other superheroine I have thus far examined, embodies the classic imagery and tropes of the patriarchally-imagined “madwoman.” Her hair is unruly, her body language frenetic and sexual. Throughout the “Scarlet Redemption” story, she shows an obsession with fire and uses it as her principal weapon, both to kill her father and to terrorize New York. Scarlet’s profound attachment to flames perfectly echoes Burton’s statement about dangerous “feminine fire.” Scarlet takes the patriarchal fear of “feminine fire” to its literal conclusion- she actually uses fire to murder men and cause chaos and destruction. She also embodies Freud’s theories that a woman’s madness is linked to her father and his assertion that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience.”<sup>27</sup>

Stained Glass Scarlet is also part of a curious group of “red” mad

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<sup>27</sup> Nicki, 80

superwomen- like the Kane sisters and Scarlet Witch (who I will get to in chapter two). The association of the color red with mad female power seems to be a prevalent one in the patriarchal imagination. Scarlet's "redness" accounts for another reason why I have chosen to end this chapter with her. I argue that the color red serves as an illuminating metaphor for the contradictions inherent in the patriarchal imagination. Red connotes love, sex, and desire as well as rage and violence. Thus, the "redness" of these heroines shows them to be an embodiment of a patriarchal imagination that can never decide if it loves, hates, fears, or desires women. Thus, we must delve into contradiction itself as a characteristic of the patriarchal imagination on the comic book page, which I will do in my next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Mad Superwomen and the Patriarchal Imagination

While the Joker scribbles away at his plans for Batman's demise, his girlfriend-cum-assistant Harley Quinn saunters around his lair, dressed in red lingerie, singing "I Feel Pretty" from the musical *West Side Story*. When Harley approaches her "puddin'" and poses flirtatiously on his desk, he violently pushes her to the floor. She hits the ground with a blocky-lettered "THUD," little stars hovering around her inverted body. Harley remains undeterred and once again tries to seduce the Joker. Once again, he responds with frustration and violence. "Don't call me Puddin'!"<sup>28</sup> he screams, as he throws her out the door, face first into a puddle of mud.

The scene in question here is from the 1994 DC Comics one-shot comic book, *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*. I have chosen this scene to begin my chapter because it illustrates a central characteristic of the patriarchal imagination on the comic book page, namely a curious dual attitude towards women. This very imagination is one that writes a fetishized, highly sexual Harley Quinn into being, has her offer her body to the Joker, and then has her cast out onto the street. In this chapter, I will delve deeper into the curious patriarchal ambivalence towards women that I mentioned earlier. In the comic book world, I see female characters as simultaneously condemned and fetishized, feared and desired, despised and worshipped. I will read a number of Mad Superheroines as both a device of and a

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<sup>28</sup> Dini, 13

creation of the patriarchal imagination. When I say that a female character is a “creation” of this imagination, I mean that she embodies certain tropes, characteristics, and aesthetics that exist in the patriarchal mind’s imagining of women. In other words, these characters are products of an imagination that cannot seem to make up its mind about women/what it wants women to be. Because this very imagination rules the comic book page, the women who exist there are filtered through a patriarchal lens. Because this lens is an ambivalent one, the portrayal of the Mad Superwoman inevitably betrays the contradictions and anxieties of that patriarchal mind.

In addition to reading these characters as realizations/articulations of a patriarchal imagination, I will also argue that women on the comic page are used as a device to allow that patriarchal imagination to work out its own anxieties and desires about women, sex, and power. I have found in my reading that the “Mad Superwoman” character type in particular embodies all three of these patriarchal fascinations. What I am proposing is that the comic book “Mad Superwoman” operates as a sort of “exposure therapy” to invoke and then subsequently ease deep-rooted anxieties about women. At the same time, “Mad Superheroine” stories provide pleasure for the patriarchal mind by allowing some of its deepest subconscious desires to be realized on the page. The patriarchal mind is able to see its anxieties and desires enacted, and thereby experiences a cathartic relief. However, while these female characters are allowed to threaten the power of men, they rarely bring the anxiety scenario to frightening fruition. They come right up to the edge of defeating/completely overpowering a man, but do not actually complete the process. At the end of these cathartic tales, the Mad Superwoman is almost always

depowered before she can actually usurp patriarchal dominance. In this way, she is a device that allows the patriarchal imagination to both pleasure and soothe itself.

Finally, I will delve into the concept of “female hysteria,” both its origins in the classical period and its seeming “peak” in the Victorian Era. I see the “hysterical woman” as one of the strongest, most pervasive, and most deeply gendered archetypes of female madness, an archetype that continually resurfaces as a source of both anxiety and fascination for the patriarchal mind. I posit that the rhetoric of hysteria characterizes the female mind and body as inherently volatile, sinister, and dangerous. I will use images of female hysteria patients from the famous French Salpêtrière hospital taken during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to expose the ways in which the patriarchal rhetoric of hysteria manifests itself on the comic book page.

Female sexuality and the female reproductive system have long been viewed with a strong mixture of desire and fear by the patriarchal mind. Here, it is helpful to return to Burton’s theory that women must have their “fire” tamed by a husband or they will become dangerous<sup>29</sup>. Using “fire” as a euphemism for female sexual energy (as I believe Burton does) positions female sexuality as something frightening, with great potential for destruction. Schiesari credits Burton’s superstitious view of women partly to the witchcraft trials occurring in his period, which created a drive to “brutally [suppress] any or all forms of femininity understood as excessive or threatening.”<sup>30</sup> Thus a female sexuality that is “mad” and “superpowered” is all the more “excessive” and “threatening” to patriarchal authority. I argue that this is a chief reason why the “Mad Superheroine” story is such a common and recurring

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<sup>29</sup> Schiesari, 14

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 21

one—her identities of “Mad” and “Super” throw patriarchal fears and fantasies into sharper relief, necessitating more cathartic retelling.

*Mad Love* makes a useful case study for illuminating this patriarchal attitude of simultaneous mistrust of and fascination with the female as a sexual being. It is also one of the clearest examples of my theory of catharsis through invoking deep-rooted patriarchal fears and pleasures. Firstly, Harley Quinn is highly fetishized throughout the comic, through her dress, poses, speech, and actions. She speaks to the Joker in a strange “baby talk,” and is always drawn in suggestive, skintight clothing. Secondly, the comic uses the possibility of Harley usurping the Joker’s power as a driving force in the narrative, but makes sure she is swiftly and violently depowered before that terrifying thought can be realized.

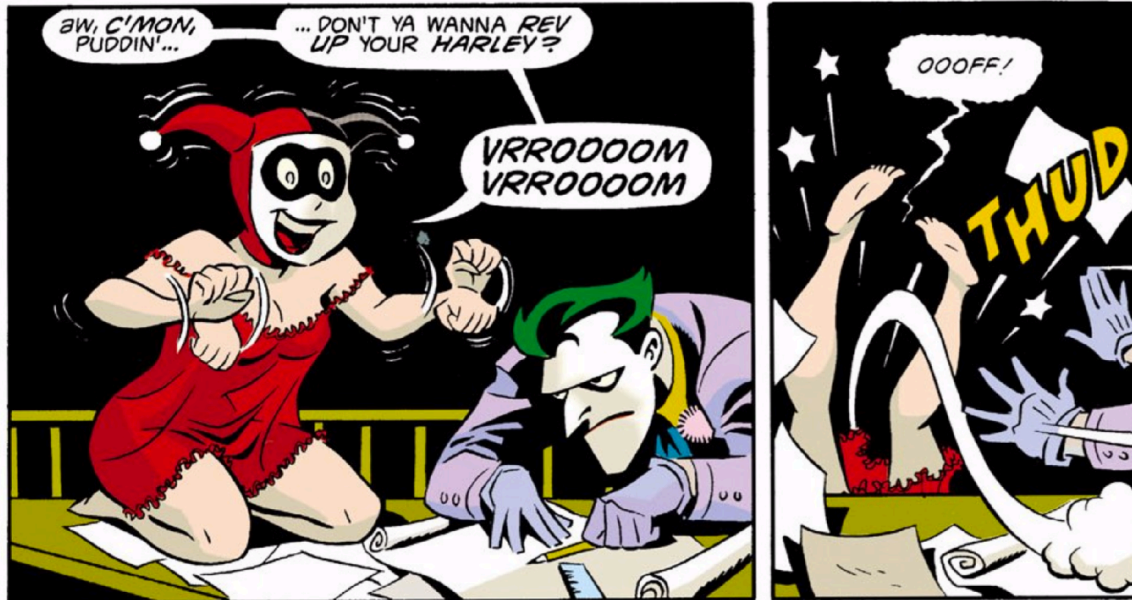
Harley Quinn undoubtedly falls into the category of a “Mad Superwoman.” She is clearly “super”—she is an expert gymnast and fighter, capable of flipping through the air and skilled with many weapons. She also uses her knowledge of medicine (from her previous career as a psychiatrist) to her advantage, injecting her enemies with hypodermic needles and rendering them powerless. She is also clearly “mad”—it’s in the title, after all. She even refers to herself as such in *Mad Love*: “Face it, Harl,” she tells herself, “this stinks.” You’re a certified nutzo wanted by the law in two dozen states...and hopelessly in love with a psychopathic clown.”<sup>31</sup> Though she is aware of her madness and status as a “certified nutzo”, she doesn’t abandon the Joker. Rather, her madness makes her into a patriarchal fantasy of the ideal female “Lover” figure. Harley Quinn lives her life only to please the Joker and constantly

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<sup>31</sup> Dini, 19



offers him her body. She is literally an accessory to him. It is her “madness” that makes this total devotion possible.



The Joker rejects Harley

When discussing patriarchal perspectives on female sexuality, one must turn to Freud. In his essay on the subject, Freud conceives of the female sexuality as something confusing and unknowable. He remarks upon how the young girl's “libidinal development” is less “simple” compared to that of boys, and that it is unrealistic to expect any “neat parallelism” between the two<sup>32</sup>. He posits that female sexual development is so complex and ridden with contradiction that, in order for a woman to end up “normal,” she must follow a “very circuitous path.”<sup>33</sup> He suggests that his explanation of the female sexual development process has likely struck his reader as “confused and contradictory.” However, he says that this “is not altogether

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<sup>32</sup> Freud, 88

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 90

the writer's fault,"<sup>34</sup> implying that there is some confusion and contradiction inherent in female sexuality. Freud also expresses a mistrust of any female emotion deemed excessive or too passionate: "this attachment to the mother must inevitably perish just because it is the first and the most intense, similarly to what we so often find in the first marriages of young women, entered in to when they were most passionately in love."<sup>35</sup>

In the context of Burton's comment about the existence of a mysterious and threatening female "fire" and Freud's characterization of female sexuality as confusing and unpredictable, Harley Quinn actually enacts both a patriarchal fantasy and a frightening potential threat to the patriarchal order. Harley's femininity/sexuality is a source of power that is inaccessible to the men of Gotham, a power made all the more volatile by her madness. Because the comic page is defined by the patriarchal imagination, Harley's exercising of a decidedly non-male power in this world becomes a threatening act of subversion. After the Joker rejects Harley at the beginning of the comic, she takes her "untamed" feminine "fire" to the streets and concocts a plan to capture Batman by herself. This plan is frightening to the patriarchal imagination because it represents the greatest possible usurping of the Joker. Destroying Batman is the Joker's ultimate goal. It is a defining drive of the entire patriarchally-controlled Gotham City universe. Therefore, If Harley Quinn can accomplish this goal on her own, the Joker will be rendered essentially useless and the dominance of the patriarchal imagination will be subverted.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

The threat of Harley Quinn gaining dominance over her male boss/lover is particularly interesting considering a flashback scene appearing earlier in the story. After the Joker throws her out, Harley recounts how she first came to fall in love with “Mistah J.” At the start of their relationship, Harley is “the boss.” She observes the Joker inside his glass-walled cell, and he must report to her for counseling. However, the balance of power soon shifts in the Joker’s direction. At their very first meeting the Joker, always one for theatrics, orchestrates a scene that gives him both psychological and sexual power over his doctor. He tells her a story from his childhood in which he imitated a clown to try to make his abusive father laugh. He tells Harley: “There I stood in the doorway, wearing his best Sunday slacks around my ankles. ‘Hi, Dad!’ I squeaked. ‘Lookit Me!’”<sup>36</sup> While he tells his story, the Joker acts it out physically, the end result of which leaves him standing, pants down, over Harley, who remains seated. This tableau clearly places the Joker in a dominant and sexually menacing position and Harley in a submissive one. The Joker then tells Harley how his father punished him so brutally for this prank that he was unconscious for “three days,”<sup>37</sup> deftly transforming Harley’s tears of laughter to tears of shocked sadness. With his “performance,” the Joker tips the balance of power in his favor, manipulating Harley until she becomes depowered. In this scene, the Joker effectively “neutralizes” the threat presented by Harley’s position of power by playing on her emotions and creating a tableau of sexual intimidation. Later in the flashback, the Joker further weakens Harley by reversing the doctor/patient dynamic that had given her some power over him. Shortly before she helps him escape from Arkham, Harley and the

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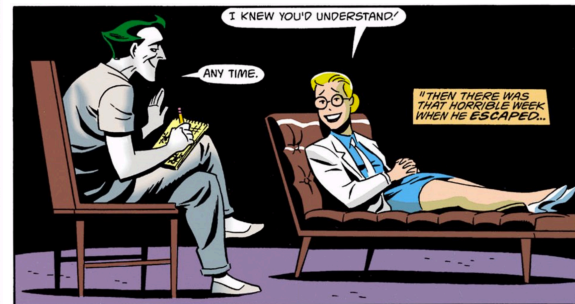
<sup>36</sup> Dini, 28

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 29

Joker have another counseling session. However, at this session, it is the Joker who is sitting in the chair and Harley lying on the couch. The Joker, now Harley’s “doctor,” psychoanalyzes her love for him, saying “it’s only natural you’d be attracted to a man who could make you laugh again.”<sup>38</sup>



Harley and the Joker’s first counseling session



The Joker analyzes Harley Quinn

In *Mad Love*, Harley uses the power of her sexuality and femininity to take down Batman. Thus, she is reversing the Joker’s earlier “neutralization” of her threatening power, thereby enacting the specific patriarchal fear of powerful female sexuality. She removes her mask and clown paint, revealing her blond hair and blue eyes, and pretends to be a helpless (and sexy) “damsel in distress.” When Batman tries to save her, she injects him with a sedative and ties him up, unconscious, dangling over a tank of piranhas. The patriarchal fear that Harley is enacting here

<sup>38</sup> Dini, 31

operates through a process of substitution. She uses her own brand of “feminine madness” to replace the Joker’s madness and become a mad supervillain in her own right. By doing this, she would substitute herself for the Joker, thereby depowering him.

At the climax of the story, Batman himself admits that Harley “came a lot closer than [the Joker] ever did” to actually killing him, seemingly confirming the patriarchal anxieties Harley is enacting. However, the “mad femininity” that was Harley’s source of power over men eventually proves to be her undoing. She is ultimately shown to be unable to live without patriarchal dominance, thereby allaying the patriarchal fear of being usurped by a woman. When Batman reminds her how furious the Joker will be if she goes through with the murder, she relents. She is so “madly” devoted to the Joker that the thought of losing him is impossible to bear. She calls the Joker in, and he takes on Batman in her stead, substituting himself back into his “rightful” place. To punish Harley for her transgression (both of his dominance and by extension the law of the patriarchal imagination), the Joker throws her out the window, sending her plummeting many stories onto the street below, mirroring their interaction in the comic’s opening pages. The comic’s final scene sees Harley robbed of any physical and emotional agency she might ever have had- she is in a hospital, recovering from the injuries she sustained from her fall. As she lies in bed, bruised and bandaged, she swears off the Joker for good, “No more obsession. No more Joker. No more craziness.”<sup>39</sup> A nurse asks her “How did it feel to be so dependent on a man, that you’d give up everything for him, gaining nothing in return?” Harley looks forlorn, but suddenly notices a vase of flowers on the table,

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<sup>39</sup> Dini, 64

with a note reading: “Feel better soon. –J” She smiles and tells the nurse: “it felt like a kiss.”<sup>40</sup> Her madness and powerful sexuality have once again rendered her dependent and powerless. By allowing Harley to come close to killing Batman and outsmarting the Joker, the patriarchal imagination acts out its anxieties about having its dominance undermined by a woman. When Batman convinces Harley to call in the Joker, this anxiety is “safely” concluded. Harley is returned to her depowered state, and Batman, the Joker, and the patriarchal psyche all remain unharmed. In Harley Quinn, the patriarchal imagination has created a “Mad Superheroine” who enacts/invokes both its anxieties and fantasies, but ultimately remains subordinate to a man.

Now I wish to turn to a “Mad Superheroine” who enacts deep-rooted fantasies and fears of women according to the patriarchal rhetoric of hysteria. In one of Marvel Comics’ most popular recent series, 2005’s *House of M*, the character Scarlet Witch (aka Wanda Maximoff) comes to embody a patriarchal view of the hysterical woman, taking cues from the Victorian period and the patriarchal medical gaze. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, “hysteria” was defined as a mysterious nervous disease for which many women were “treated” and institutionalized. In fact, in 1859, physician George Taylor claimed that one quarter of all women likely had hysteria. This so-called “female hysteria” was viewed as fundamentally a disorder with its origins in the reproductive system, particularly the uterus. Many physicians cited Hippocrates’ theory of the “wandering womb,” namely, that if a woman’s uterus is “unsatisfied” or “bad,” it will release “toxic fumes” and begin to wander around the afflicted woman’s

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 65

body, causing a variety of hysterical symptoms. In the Victorian period, the uterus was sometimes removed altogether in order to “cure” a female patient’s hysteria.

In *House of M*, Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch is portrayed as an hysterical woman, made all the more threatening by her superpowers. In the classic Victorian fashion, her breakdown is shown to be tied to/have its origins in her womb. Long before the events of *House of M*, Wanda uses her powers to give birth to twin boys, who are later reverted back into fragments of magic. Devastated at her loss, she casts a spell to make herself forget her children had ever existed. Although she is able to keep her memories of the twins largely repressed, her magic powers begin to wear down her sanity. It is eventually revealed that Wanda possesses the power of “chaos magic” a power more volatile and damaging than those of, for example, her father Magneto and her twin brother Quicksilver, who both wield their mutant powers with relative stability. When a memory of her babies eventually resurfaces, Wanda suffers what the official Marvel website describes as “a nervous breakdown.”<sup>41</sup> She lashes out in a fit of uncontrolled chaos magic, killing several Avengers, destroying the mutant homeland of Genosha, and warping all of reality. The “failure” of her womb to produce viable offspring is the root from which her destructive “madness” stems. Her pain is an exclusively female one—a mother’s grief at losing her children.

In the opening pages of *House of M # 1*, (2005) Wanda is in the throes of a powerful delusion. Visually, her fantasy world looks Victorian. In her fantasy, she is giving birth to her lost sons. She lies in a large wooden bed on sumptuous red sheets. Her long dark hair is curled with perspiration and hangs wildly around her face. She is attended by several other superheroes, including Doctor Strange, Magneto,

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<sup>41</sup> "Scarlet Witch." *Marvel Universe Wiki*.

Quicksilver and her husband, the Vision. The room she is in is large with high ceilings and gauzy curtains. The scene depicts an old-fashioned home birth rather than the modern one that would likely be available to a prominent superhero with access to cutting edge technology. The modern world doesn't intrude into Wanda's mental world until Professor Xavier enters the room in his high-tech wheelchair and sleek suit. He demands that Wanda "put the world back,"<sup>42</sup> and the rose-tinged birth scene literally splinters into glass-like fragments. Now we glimpse Wanda's true reality- she is alone with Professor X in a dark room furnished only with a metal bed.

Even though Professor X has brought us back to the real world, the comic's visuals retain a Victorian-style aesthetic. Wanda mirrors the archetypical fainting Victorian lady as she falls to the ground before Professor X, weeping and clutching her heart. She is not wearing her typical red jumpsuit, cape, and headdress but is instead dressed in a different sort of costume—that of the hysterical 19<sup>th</sup> Century woman. She is wearing a curiously un-modern full-length embroidered nightgown. Tears stream down her cheeks and she loses the ability to speak coherently. In order to subdue her, Professor X drugs her and uses his psychic powers to force her into an artificial sleep. Professor X's methods of "treating" Wanda are strikingly reminiscent to the ways in which Victorian doctors treated women diagnosed with hysteria. Their bodies were manipulated without their consent by male doctors who believed they knew what was best. Complete hysterectomies and other invasive (and unnecessary) gynecological surgeries were considered a "cure" for hysteria. Another common "treatment" was institutionalization. Professor X acts as Wanda's superpowered

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<sup>42</sup> Bendis, 4



doctor, keeping her in a controlled environment and putting her to sleep when her “fits” grow too dangerous.



Wanda’s dream shatters



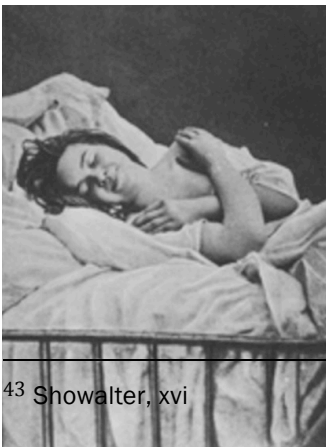
Wanda and Professor X



Wanda’s dream sequence

In one panel of *House of M # 1*, a sleeping Wanda is visited by her brother Quicksilver (Pietro Maximoff). She lies on the metal bed, tangled up in a mass of white sheets, long dark hair flowing across the pillow. She is still weeping, even while unconscious. The panel is very large, taking up almost half of the entire page. This image of the sleeping Wanda hearkens back to famous images of hysteria patients, particularly those of French physician Jean-Martin Charcot’s “star patient,” a teenage

girl named Augustine. Charcot took numerous photographs of Augustine during her so-called “attitudes passionelles.”<sup>43</sup> These photos show a young woman in a nightgown with her long dark hair worn loose. She lies atop white sheets and is sometimes photographed asleep. The image of Wanda asleep is also reminiscent of another famous bedridden dark-haired 19<sup>th</sup> Century woman prone to fits—Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia.” In these characters, we can plainly see that the hysterical woman, threatening as she may be, is also a patriarchal sexual fantasy. There is a distinctly erotic aesthetic tied to the “hysterical” woman. Her “madness” makes her body highly sexual- she tears at her clothing, her hair comes loose, she convulses and writhes. At the same time, she is also helpless and completely dependent. The hysteria patient’s “condition” reduced her to child-like status, a weak creature whose life was completely controlled by male doctors, who benevolently saved her from herself. The male doctor/helpless female patient relationship is another sort of patriarchal fantasy enacted by the Mad Superheroine. Like Harley Quinn and the Joker, the female hysteria patient is entirely dependent on men, who rule every aspect of her mind and body. The characterization of the female hysteric as simultaneously clothing-rending and infantilized further illustrates patriarchal ambivalence.

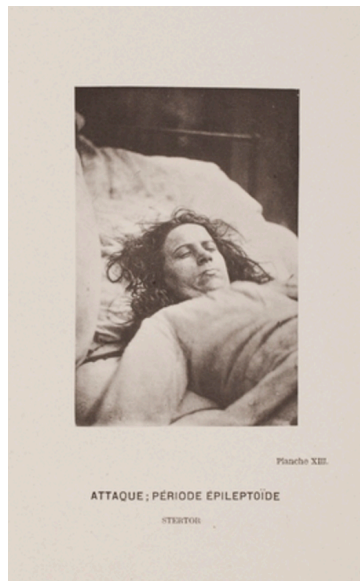


<sup>43</sup> Showalter, xvi

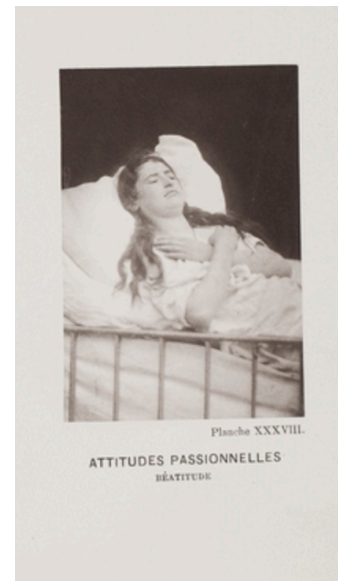
Augustine demonstrating her “attitudes passionelles”



Wanda asleep



Salpêtrière patients



Unlike that of her male relatives and superhero peers, the source of Wanda’s superpowers is portrayed in the comics as something primal, unknowable, and dangerous. While Magneto, Quicksilver, Wolverine, etc. are simply mutants, born with

genetic enhancements, Wanda is imbued with the less easily defined “chaos magic.”<sup>44</sup> This magic came to her by way of a sinister demon god, whose energies were strong near the place of her birth. It is not explained why Wanda has chaos magic powers while her twin brother does not. In other words, her powers are not rational and explainable by science (or at least, comic book science) like those of her brother and thus not able to be controlled or understood by the “reasonable” patriarchal imagination. “Chaos magic” is a potent metaphor for the way the patriarchal mind views female sexuality. It is enticing (“magical”) and deeply threatening (“chaotic”) all at once. The dark and mysterious origins of Wanda’s powers represent all that is unknowable and frightening about feminine sexuality, the very same fear that made Victorian doctors operate on or lock away their female patients. Her erotic poses and suddenly “uninhibited” body make her simultaneously an object of patriarchal desire and condemnation. Thus, the female hysteria patient is an illuminating example of patriarchal ambivalence towards women.

Just as in *Mad Love*, the *House of M* series allows patriarchal anxieties and desires to be enacted, but doesn’t let the Mad Superheroine keep her power. At the comic’s end, Wanda transforms the world back to its normal state. In the process, the vast majority of the mutant population is depowered, leaving only 198 active mutants out of millions. One of those depowered is Wanda herself. In an extraordinarily regressive move, she returns to the small (fictional) Eastern European nation of her birth and lives in obscurity. This seems a warning for any woman thinking about exercising her power—power will make you hysterical and, in the treatment of that hysteria, you will lose what made you powerful in the first place,

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<sup>44</sup> “Scarlet Witch.” *Marvel Universe Wiki*

restoring patriarchal order. By depowering Wanda at the end of *House of M*, the story assuages the patriarchal anxiety it evokes at the beginning, while also allowing its audience a taboo sort of pleasure by enacting a fantasy about “helpless,” “uninhibited”, clothing-rending women.

With all this in mind, it is no wonder that the Mad Superheroine story is so pervasive in the comic book genre. Though I have chosen *Mad Love* and *House of M* as my chief examples, the same point could have been made with a variety of other stories, too numerous to list here. Clearly, the Mad Superheroine tale speaks to a deep and powerful impulse in the patriarchal psyche—why else would it feel the need to keep retelling the same stories over and over again, writing more and more Mad Superwomen into being? Furthermore, can this patriarchal machinery of manufacturing and retelling ever be stopped or at least interrupted? Despite this machinery’s overwhelming pervasiveness on the comic book page. I argue that it can. In my next chapter, I will explore two Mad Superheroine characters who are able to subvert the dictates of the patriarchal imagination and break out of the “mold(s)” explored in chapter 2.

### Chapter 3: Writing Back to the Patriarchal Imagination

In my previous two chapters, I have enumerated the ways in which the mad superheroine is subject to the demands and desires of the patriarchal imagination. However, I do not wish to conclude that the comic book madwoman must always be a voiceless product and victim of the ambivalent and anxious patriarchal mind. In my final chapter, I will explore works in the comic book genre that use the Mad Superheroine character type to effectively “talk back” to the patriarchal imagination and challenge some of its assumptions. To aid me in my analysis of what these stories work towards in responding to patriarchy, I will employ elements of postcolonial literary theory. Though the colony/colonized model is an imperfect one to use here, I nevertheless find the postcolonial model a particularly helpful one in considering the mad superheroine’s existence on the comic book page. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin write in their book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, “Women, like postcolonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own, when their only available ‘tools’ are those of the ‘colonizer.’”<sup>45</sup> The Mad Superwoman stories I am exploring in this chapter do just that. They use the “tools of the colonizer,” namely the conventions of the comic book genre to create a language that subverts the dominating ideology of the patriarchal imagination.

I want to note here that I do not wish to imply that these graphic novel and comic stories are actually works of postcolonial literature. Rather, I wish to say that,

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<sup>45</sup> Ashcroft, Griffins, and Tiffin, 172

in writing back to/challenging a dominant ideology, they have some qualities in common with postcolonial literatures. I am using elements of postcolonial literary theory as tools to help me better understand what exactly these works are accomplishing by challenging the patriarchal imagination. According to Ashcroft, Griffins and Tiffin, postcolonial literature is concerned with “the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.”<sup>46</sup> In this case, the “self” is the mad superheroine character and the “place” is the comic book page on which she exists. The stories I will be examining in this chapter all work to reconstitute an identity (or identities) for Mad Superwomen characters in a way that subverts the dictates of the patriarchal imagination laid out in my first two chapters. In this chapter, it will be crucial to be methodical, to clearly anatomize what exactly these dictates are, so the ways in which they are subverted become clearer.

The first of these subverted dictates is the patriarchal assumption that sexual trauma on the comic book page creates madness. I have chosen to begin with this trope, because it allows me to tackle one of the most controversial iconic examples of sexual trauma in the comic book genre: *Batman: The Killing Joke* (DC Comics, 1988). It may seem counterintuitive to include a comic that has been condemned with such epithets as “infamous,” “brutal,”<sup>47</sup> “toxic,” and “sadistic,”<sup>48</sup> for its treatment of women in a chapter on challenging patriarchal assumptions. I do not plan to justify *The Killing Joke*, but rather to argue that it inadvertently sets the stage for a powerful subversion of patriarchal assumptions about Mad Superheroines.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>47</sup> Lane, “The Killing Joke Might Be the First R-Rated Batman Flick.”

<sup>48</sup> Pulliam-Moore, “The Killing Joke was Toxic When it First Came Out- DC Doesn’t Need to Remake It.”

*The Killing Joke* follows the Joker's plot to traumatize James Gordon, friend of Batman and police commissioner of Gotham City. To do this, the Joker brutalizes Gordon's daughter, Barbara Gordon a.k.a. Batgirl, in an effort to drive her father into madness. About midway through the story, Barbara is seen at home with her father, helping him file newspaper clippings about Batman. The doorbell rings and Barbara opens it to find the Joker holding a gun. He shoots her through the spine, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. She is then stripped naked, bound, posed, and photographed by the Joker's henchmen. We see her trauma only as the photos are shown to an imprisoned commissioner Gordon. Barbara wakes up in the hospital and exclaims to Batman: "Oh God! Oh God, I remember! Oh, Bruce, what he did..."<sup>49</sup>

According to the patriarchal conventions laid out in my first chapter, this trauma should turn Barbara Gordon into a yet another chaotic, hysterical Mad Superwoman. Think of Stained Glass Scarlet, whose sexual abuse made her into a weeping, violent, nightmare-wracked villainess, hell-bent on destruction. However, Barbara does not entirely fall victim to the patriarchal assumptions about sexual trauma that condemn Scarlet to madness and misery. Rather, she reconstitutes her identity separate from her trauma, becoming not a "stained" version of her pre-trauma self, but an entirely new hero—Oracle. Furthermore, she is not fragmented by trauma into two selves like Aurora or Rose/Thorn. She does not become Oracle/Barbara, instead retaining an integrated selfhood. As Oracle, Barbara becomes "the world's premiere infojock and data specialist supreme."<sup>50</sup> The evidence of her trauma doesn't disappear—she now uses a wheelchair—but neither

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<sup>49</sup> Moore, 18

<sup>50</sup> Simone, 11



does her “superness.” She sets herself up in the Batcave and compiles a massive database of information in order to help her fellow superheroes. She meets Dinah Lance a.k.a. Black Canary and together they, along with several other heroes, form the *Birds of Prey*, an all-female superhero team. Oracle communicates with her teammates electronically, feeding them information and strategy from the Batcave. She is rational, self-possessed, and intelligent, often acting as the voice of reason for her more reckless teammates. I do not mean to imply that she is a perfectly subversive figure. As I’ve argued previously, contradiction and inconsistency pervade the comic book genre. Indeed, Barbara’s portrayal as Oracle does sometimes fall into patriarchal pitfalls, but she in many ways destabilizes patriarchal assumptions about traumatized women.

To give an idea of Barbara Gordon and the ways in which she subverts patriarchal machinery, I will begin with a scenes from her origin story, as told in “Oracle- Year One: Born of Hope,” (1996) by Kim Yale and John Ostrander. The story picks up where *The Killing Joke* left off, with Barbara still hospitalized after her attack. When Batman comes to visit Barbara again, she seems keenly aware of her position as an accessory/device of male fear and desire. Crucially, we cannot see Batman’s face in this scene- he appears entirely in shadow so that the only face we can see is Barbara’s. She tells Batman:

“[The Joker] wanted me alive. Not because I have any intrinsic worth or meaning to him, of course. No. Shooting me...kidnapping my dad...it was all just a way to get to you. Do you understand how humiliating, how demeaning, that is?! My life has no importance save in relation to you! Even as Batgirl, I was perceived just as some weaker version of you!”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ostrander and Yale, 3

Barbara's railing against being used as a tool only valuable "in relation" to men serves as a fitting analogy for how the patriarchal imagination uses the Mad Superwoman. The fact that this thought is articulated by a traumatized superheroine, while Batman can only sit and listen, makes this scene all the more subversive. The patriarchal imagination assumes that the Mad Superwoman is too tormented, too busy warring within herself to break free of the mold it sets out for her, or to even realize that she is confined to a mold at all. In this scene, Barbara proves that this is not always the case.



Barbara confronts Batman

Though I will return to the origin story, I will now be analyzing Barbara as she appears in the *Birds of Prey* comics written by Gail Simone, from 1999-2011. I have

chosen Simone's take on the character as the focus of my analysis for a number of reasons. Firstly, I felt it necessary to include the voice of a female writer in my chapter on challenging patriarchal assumptions. After all, isn't another patriarchal assumption about comics that they are invariably created by men? Of course, the fact that Simone is a woman does not magically free her from the patriarchal constraints of the genre, but I will argue that her portrayal of Oracle is a particularly nuanced and subversive one. She creates many moments in which Barbara, as a victim of trauma, "flips the script" on patriarchal assumptions about what a female victim of sexual trauma "should" be.

In *Birds of Prey #4* (2010-2011), Barbara and Savant, a male hero, enact a powerful reversal of the patriarchal trope of the hysterical female sexual trauma victim. Savant is a former blackmailing expert who Barbara believed she had helped reform. After being tortured by Barbara's enemies for his association with her, Savant decides to kidnap Barbara when he returns to Gotham City. Savant enters the Batcave, kidnaps Barbara at gunpoint, and takes her to a bridge on the outskirts of the city. He stands behind her on the bridge, poised to kill her by pushing her chair over the edge. However, Simone creates a stunning "flipping the script" moment when Savant reveals why he is really standing on the bridge. He is not there to kill Barbara, but to kill himself. It is revealed that Savant "lacks the ability to conceptualize time" and has thus never been able to escape the trauma of his torture two years prior. His assistant Creote explains to Barbara that, "for him, the

torture happened five minutes ago. Every day, for the past two years, every waking moment...he has relived every second of his torture.”<sup>52</sup>

This is especially significant given Barbara’s inner commentary during this scene. As she stares out over the edge of the bridge, she thinks to herself: “I would run this edge in the rain in the dark. In heels. That was then. Before we knew we could be hurt. Or Killed.”<sup>53</sup> Barbara hasn’t forgotten or repressed her trauma, like Rose/Thorn, but she is not permanently stuck in it. She is able to conceptualize it as a “then,” not as her present “now.” As we have seen, patriarchal assumptions about female sexual trauma often create female characters unable to move forward from their trauma, unable to conceptualize time in a way that places their traumas in the past. Savant’s brain, which literally cannot process time post-trauma is exactly the sort of brain that the patriarchal mind imagines the traumatized Mad Superwoman to possess. Though Stained Glass Scarlet’s trauma occurred in childhood, she still experiences hallucinations of her abusive father. This is not true of Barbara, who is able to see trauma as a part of the past. In fact, she seems surprised to hear of Savant’s inability to leave his trauma behind. “But that was two years ago!” she exclaims, “I thought you’d recovered.”<sup>54</sup> Here is where the “script flipping” comes in. In this interaction, the suicidal Savant possesses the hysterical, emotional mind and Barbara the reasoning, rational one. Savant, the *male* hero, suffers from the “feminine” inability to conceptualize time properly and move away from trauma.

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<sup>52</sup> Simone, 10

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

Barbara possesses the “masculine” ability to succeed where Savant fails: “I used to be like you, Savant. I lacked faith. I lost the ability to trust those around me.”<sup>55</sup>

In addition to subverting patriarchal expectations about gendered responses to trauma, this scene also “flips the script” on another gendered patriarchal convention we have highlighted- the doctor/patient model. As we’ve already seen, the “default” position of traumatized women on the comic book page seems to be as mad “patient,” with male characters standing in for the role of “doctor.” (Think of Professor X and Scarlet Witch in *House of M.*) However, in the bridge scene, Barbara becomes the rational “doctor” figure, counseling Savant the traumatized, mad “patient.” The subversive nature of this scene becomes even clearer when we consider it alongside another “doctor/patient” scene on the comic book page, namely, Harley Quinn and the Joker’s first meeting in *Mad Love*. In my discussion of this scene in chapter two, I examine how, though Harley begins the scene as the Joker’s counselor, he quickly turns the tables on her. He strategically manipulates her more emotional “female” brain, telling her about his abusive father and childhood hardships so that, by the end of the scene, he is seated in the therapist’s chair and Harley is lying on the couch. They might as well be Freud with a female patient, or Charcot and Augustine. In the *Mad Love* scene, the panels zoom in closely on Harley’s facial expressions, emphasizing her “emotional” nature. In the *Birds of Prey* scene, we see Savant’s hopeless expression up close, while Barbara is actually in shadow. In the bridge scene, Barbara and Savant enact a reversal of the patriarchal imagination’s assumed male doctor/female patient relationship as demonstrated in *Mad Love*. The end result of all this “script flipping” is not, however,

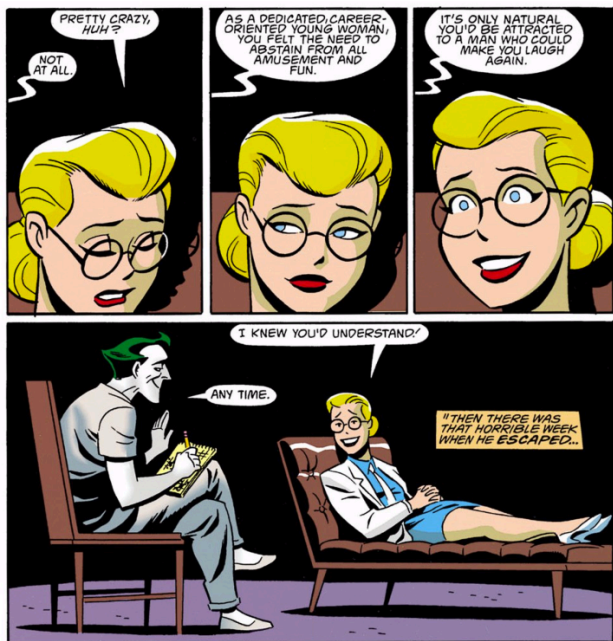
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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 11

simply a reversal that ends up affirming the fixity of these gendered roles. It is a deeper subversion that not only turns patriarchal assumptions on their head but also shows that the Mad Superwoman is capable of breaking the mold set out for her by the patriarchal mind. Thus, this “script flipping” ends up destabilizing the machinery of the patriarchal imagination.



Savant and Oracle on the bridge



Harley Quinn and The Joker

Of course, one cannot discuss women as patients without mentioning the deeply gendered “illness” of hysteria. As I mentioned in chapter two, the womb was regarded for much of history as the cause of female madness, hence the name “hysteria” (since “hyster” means uterus). In *House of M*, we saw how the patriarchal imagination reinforced this presumption on the comic book page, as Scarlet Witch’s reproductive failure sent her into hysterical madness. In *Birds of Prey #2* (2010-

2011), Simone uses Oracle to reframe the uterus as a powerful rational space, as opposed to a chaotic, mad one. When enemy forces obtain files of information about Oracle and her Birds of Prey teammates, she decides to fight back using her own massive database. Crucially, she refers to her highly sophisticated digital information system as “Data Womb.”<sup>56</sup> This repurposing of the word “womb” is highly subversive in the patriarchal realm of the comic book page. The DC comics database describes Oracle’s system as “one of the world’s most complex and powerful computer systems.”<sup>57</sup> According to the usual patriarchal assumptions, the term “data womb” would be an oxymoron, as the womb is imagined as the ultimate mad and irrational space, incapable of processing anything so rational and objective as “data.” By having Oracle refer to her “Data Womb,” the comic aligns the female reproductive system with an extraordinarily powerful computer system, thereby reframing the womb as a rational and intelligent space and undermining patriarchal assumptions about the “hysterical” female body. The comic then takes this association one step further. As she is strategizing, Barbara thinks to herself: “I *am* the grid.”<sup>58</sup> Now the Data Womb is not just aligned with the female body in the abstract, but with Barbara’s body, a body that has endured sexual trauma. When considering how the patriarchal mind normally imagines female victims of traumatic sexual violence, Barbara’s statement that she *is* “the grid” is downright revolutionary.

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<sup>56</sup> Simone, 22

<sup>57</sup> "Barbara Gordon." *DC Comics Database*.

<sup>58</sup> Simone, 22



Barbara and her Data Womb

Indeed, if you examine her closely, much of Barbara's identity can be read as a redefining of female madness on the comic book page. Her superhero name, Oracle, hearkens back to some of the first Mad Superwomen in Western Culture—ancient Greek oracles. These women were “super,” endowed with the power to prophesy the future, but they were also invariably seen as “mad,”<sup>59</sup> dispensing cryptic advice and prone to fits of passion. Think of Cassandra, the cursed oracle, clinging desperately to a statue of Athena during the capture of Troy.<sup>60</sup> Or the iconic Oracle of Delphi, who would enter a “trance like state” in order to make predictions to visitors.<sup>61</sup> Barbara Gordon reconstitutes what it means to be an “oracle.” She is able to become “omniscient”<sup>62</sup> and all-knowing not because of some mysterious trance or curse, but because she is intelligent and determined. Aligning these qualities with the highly gendered title of “Oracle” reconstitutes the identity of the mad superwoman away from words like “dangerous” and “chaotic,” opening up the possibility that she can be logical and wise as well. Furthermore, by renaming herself

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<sup>59</sup> Bell, “Cassandra.”

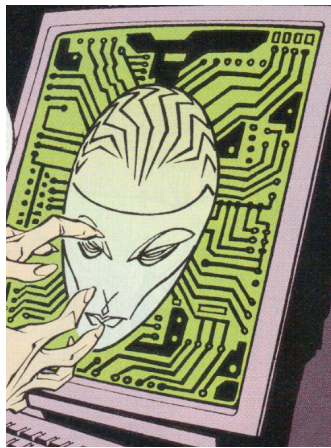
<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Nevins, Jesse. “The Oracle at Delphi.”

<sup>62</sup> Simone, 22



based on an icon of womanhood, (i.e. the classical oracle) she reverses the patriarchal machinery that would portray her as merely a “weaker version”<sup>63</sup> of Batman. She is no longer “Batgirl,” an identity defined by her relationship to a man, but a superhero in her own right. As she says near the end of “Oracle- Year One”: “I could assume an identity- and this time not a second-hand version of someone else. This would be mine- my mask, my shield, my persona.”<sup>64</sup> She even has her own logo, no longer going by the Bat symbol.



Oracle's symbol



Barbara becomes Oracle

With Barbara/Oracle's generally logical and rational nature in mind, as well as her ability to move past her trauma, the question must arise in the reader's mind: is she even a *Mad* Superwoman at all? I argue that the answer is yes. She is a *Mad* Superwoman, she just makes way for the term to signify different things than what the patriarchal imagination assumes it signifies. Like Rose/Thorn and Aurora, Barbara Gordon has been canonically diagnosed with a mental illness due to her

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<sup>63</sup> Ostrander and Yale, 3

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 15

trauma- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.<sup>65</sup> Her symptoms- nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, and depression are shown in depth, particularly in “Oracle- Year One.” Her intelligence and power do not mean that she is unequivocally “sane.” Just the opposite, actually. Simone’s characterization of Barbara Gordon as a sufferer of mental illness, a survivor of sexual trauma, *and* a highly rational and intelligent person works to redefine what being a Mad Superwoman in the comic book genre means. *Birds of Prey* “writes back” to patriarchy by giving new meaning to the Mad Superwoman identity, allowing for a proliferation of meanings outside the patriarchally-imagined ones. Simply put, Barbara Gordon is living proof that the Mad Superwoman on the comics page (particularly the traumatized Mad Superwoman) doesn’t have to be a hysterical, dangerous, and chaotic figure. To return to our postcolonial comparison, *Birds of Prey* uses the patriarchal imagination’s “acceptable form”<sup>66</sup> of “cultural production”<sup>67</sup> (i.e. the comic book genre) to challenge the assumptions of the dominant ideology that would seek to marginalize and define the Mad Superwoman figure.

Another pervasive patriarchal assumption about Mad Superwomen that we have seen is the trope of the female superhero who becomes mad as the result of a parent’s death. Almost always, the loss of the parent (or parents) occurs in the female hero’s childhood, leaving her mentally fractured as a result. The work that I believe most effectively “writes back” to this assumption is actually not a comic book

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<sup>65</sup> Scarlet, “The Psychology of Inspirational Women: Batgirl.”

<sup>66</sup> *The Empire Writes Back*, 6

<sup>67</sup> *The Empire Writes Back*, 7

at all, but a graphic novel. Barbara Thorson,<sup>68</sup> the protagonist of *I Kill Giants* (Image Comics, 2011) by Joe Kelly is a Mad Superwoman who suffers the loss of her mother to cancer at a young age. However, unlike our other mad heroines who have lost parents, the story of Barbara's loss is not told in a flashback. Barbara is twelve years old during *I Kill Giants*, which never jumps forward to show her as a traumatized adult. I argue that this is a main reason why *I Kill Giants* is so effective in challenging the patriarchal imagination. It intercepts the patriarchal imagination "at the source," before it can fulfill its assumptions and create yet another Mad Superwoman according to its own dictates. In other words, the patriarchal imagination manufactures Mad Superwomen who have lost their parents and uses the fractured female childhood as a device to explain madness (see my discussion of Rose/Thorn in chapter 1). *I Kill Giants* reverses this patriarchal machinery by introducing us to a mad superwoman who is a child, not as an adult who then has flashbacks to her childhood. This effectively disrupts the patriarchal process and allows for it to be challenged. The fact that Barbara's mother is dying of cancer, as opposed to having been murdered or killed in a violent accident also arrests the patriarchal machinery in a subversive way.

Barbara's age also has another important effect on her position within the patriarchal imagination. Because she is a child, she is not subject to the patriarchal gaze in the same way that adult heroines like Scarlet Witch or Aurora are. Barbara is a Mad Superwoman who exists in the liminal space between childhood, which the patriarchy dictates must be fractured by trauma, and adulthood, which the patriarchy

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<sup>68</sup> From this point forward, to avoid confusion, I will refer to Barbara Gordon as Oracle and Barbara Thorson as Barbara.

dictates must be defined by madness. This adult madness is, as we have seen, so often sexualized, making Mad Superwomen into wild haired hysteria patients, mad lovers, or damsels in distress. In other words, we have seen how patriarchal mind maps out what a Mad Superwoman's childhood and adulthood can look like.

However, it doesn't seem to know what to do with the Mad Superwoman at a more liminal age, since this character type only ever seems to appear in flashbacks as a child or as a fully mature woman. Barbara, as a prepubescent girl, confuses the patriarchal mind, which cannot decide whether to sexualize or infantilize her. Thus, she is able to stand slightly outside patriarchal dictates about Mad "Super-Womanhood" is thereby better situated to subvert them.

In "postcolonial" fashion, *I Kill Giants* uses the accepted language of the patriarchal imagination as a way in to Barbara's subversive narrative. The story opens with Barbara telling the reader how she became a giant hunter. She speaks in language borrowed from fairy tales, legends, and, most significantly, superhero origin stories. She sews an emblematic hammer onto her bag as she speaks:

"It was a time of darkness...where the cities of the damned were stacked high with the bones of fallen heroes. The currency of the day was hopelessness, and monstrosities roamed the earth unbound by borders and unmatched in their cruelty...until...dawn rose upon the back on a lone rider who seemed to have galloped from the yellowed pages of some forgotten tale into the world. A knight. Stalwart. Lionhearted. And when she raised her weapon in righteous anger, woe to he who—"69

She suddenly pricks her finger and cuts herself off with an abrupt "Oww!! Damn it," before returning to her work. She uses her bloodied finger to draw another hammer on the bag, swearing "take the force of my enemy and send it back to him a

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<sup>69</sup> Kelly, 1-2

thousand thousand times.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, throughout the novel, Barbara uses masculine imagery to help create a narrative for herself. She adopts the hammer as an emblem. That, combined with the fact that her surname is Thorson, styles her after Thor, an icon of super masculinity. She names her hammer “Coveleski,”<sup>71</sup> after Harry Coveleski, an early-1900s major league baseball pitcher who earned the nickname “The Giant Killer” for his team’s multiple victories against the New York Giants.<sup>72</sup>

As with the heroines I explored in chapters 1 and 2, Barbara’s madness is the source of her “super-ness.” Though (almost) no one else in her world can see them, she claims to kill and hunt giants, and is frequently seen reading about giant mythology and setting elaborate traps for their capture. When she proclaims herself a giant hunter in school, she is condemned by her teachers and classmates as “crazy,”<sup>73</sup> “freak,”<sup>74</sup> “psycho,”<sup>75</sup> and “mental,”<sup>76</sup> However, when Barbara is alone, the reader sees what she sees. Her world is populated by tiny winged creatures who follow her around, fantastical floating animals, long-legged creatures she calls “harbingers,”<sup>77</sup> and, of course, giants. Barbara’s mind allows her to take down huge giants and wield Coveleski with fearsome power.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>72</sup> Heiselman, “*Harry Coveleski.*”

<sup>73</sup> Kelly, 73

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 72

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 84



Barbara and Coveleski



Barbara's giants



The fact that we can see what Barbara sees is crucial to the comic's undermining of patriarchal assumptions. Though she may be "mad" in her visions of

giants and monsters, we understand her and are able to see her in the way she sees herself. We do not see a “mad” girl punching the air, but an awesomely powerful superheroine, even if we are only looking into her imagination. The fact that Barbara is understood is further underscored by a scene near the story’s end, in which two of her fellow classmates are also able to see a giant. One is the girl who has been bullying Barbara and the other is Barbara’s only friend, Sophia. Both girls cower in fear and watch in awe as Barbara pulls a giant hammer from her bag and fearlessly goes up against the giant. “She was so brave,” Sophia later tells Barbara’s sister, “she’s not afraid of anything. It was so big.”<sup>78</sup> By having both readers and other characters see what Barbara sees, *I Kill Giants* shows compassion and understanding to the mind of the Mad Superwoman and allows her to be understood, rather than condemned. This understanding does not erase her madness, but it humanizes and de-stigmatizes it. Allowing Barbara to be understood in this way shows her to be a complex and whole person, a radical move on the comic book page where the Mad Superwoman is typically reduced to a gendered archetype.

Furthermore, Barbara’s “Mad Superwoman-ness” actually helps her cope with the loss of her mother. Shortly before the scene in which Barbara fights the giant, we find out via her school guidance counselor that her mother is dying of cancer. Barbara, terrified by the prospect of losing her mother, has immersed herself in her giant fighting. Though it is unclear whether she “fought giants” before her mother fell ill, it is clear that Barbara is using her fantasies as an escape mechanism to avoid facing her fears. Though this may seem unhealthy and even delusional, *I Kill Giants* works to dignify the mad, super, female mind by allowing Barbara’s giants to actually

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 144

help her process her mother's illness and move forward. In her climactic fight with the giant, Barbara screams: "You will not take her!! Nothing will take her!!...I She's going to live because I beat you. She's going to live. Mom..."<sup>79</sup> Here, the patriarchal mind would likely expect the young Mad Superwoman to be defeated or tormented by her madness like Aurora, Rose/Thorn, Scarlet Witch, Stained Glass Scarlet, and so many others are. However, the giant responds to Barbara: "I did not come for herrrrrrr...I came for you, child. All things that live, die. This is why you must find joy in the living while the time is yours and not fear the end. To deny this is to deny life. To fear this...is to fear life. But to embrace this...can you embrace this? You are stronger than you think."<sup>80</sup> The giant, the embodiment of Barbara's madness, actually becomes a source of strength and healing for her. After her encounter with the giant, Barbara is finally able to face her mother. The story then jumps a few months into the future. Barbara's mother is on her deathbed and the school psychiatrist asks Barbara if she is scared. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she responds, "We're just saying goodbye."<sup>81</sup> After her mother's wake, Barbara enters her mother's empty bedroom and begins to cry. When she looks up, she sees the giant out the window, looming over the beach and looking at her. "We're all right. I'm all right. Thank you,"<sup>82</sup> she says, and the giant disappears back under the water.

In *I Kill Giants*, Barbara Thorson uses the typically patriarchal language and imagery of superheroes and knights to strengthen herself. Though she is a Mad Superwoman, her madness is not, in the end, framed as dangerous. Rather, it allows

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 129-131

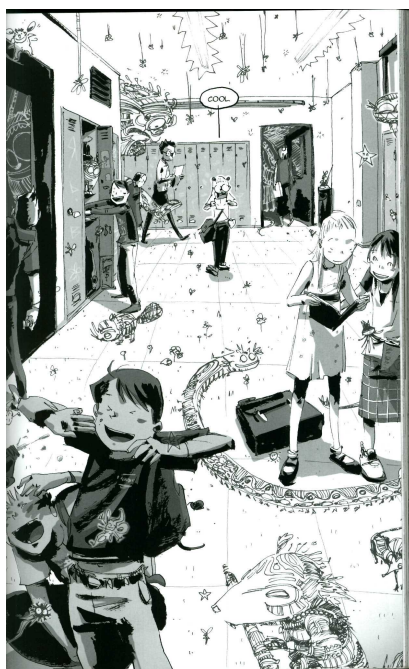
<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 149-150

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 162

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 173



her to heal and process a traumatic loss in a way that many women on the comic book page are never allowed to. Crucially, Barbara is not “cured” of her madness at the story’s end- she still sees the giant even after she knows she will be able to survive losing her mother. She does not suddenly proclaim that she has been hallucinating or fantasizing all this time. Her portrayal works to reconstitute Mad Superwoman identity by demonstrating that the mind of the traumatized superheroine is not necessarily a dangerous and destructive force and can, in fact, be a source of a healing imagination. She further challenges patriarchal dictates about Mad Superwomen by reimagining what it means to be a young girl enduring the loss of a parent on the comic book page. She challenges the notion that young female characters who lose their parents are irreparably fractured (like Rose/Thorn or Alice/Kate) and shows that they are capable of bravery, intelligence, and complexity in the face of traumatic grief. In this way, Barbara’s (and Oracle’s) portrayal subverts not just the traditional Mad Superwoman identity, but also the fixity of that identity itself. In proving the patriarchal imagination “wrong,” she also shows that the Mad Superwoman’s identity on the comic book page need not be only that which the patriarchal imagination sets forth.



Barbara's world



The Giant appears after the funeral

Up until this chapter, I have been exploring the many ways in which the patriarchal imagination limits the Mad Superheroine character. While it may allow her to “mean” multiple things at once, (for example, in the case of the hysteria patient, to be both a helpless childlike figure and a sexualized, clothing-tearing madwoman) those meanings are always imagined by the patriarchal mind alone. To return to our postcolonial analogy, the Mad Superwoman narratives explored in this chapter challenge the “myths of identity”<sup>83</sup> and the myths of power put forth by the dominating patriarchal authority. This challenging of colonial myths is an element common to a wide variety of postcolonial literatures. Postcolonial literatures are concerned with “decentering and pluralism,”<sup>84</sup> drives which are highly present in *Birds of Prey* and *I Kill Giants*. Both Barbara Thorson and Oracle destabilize assumptions of the patriarchal imagination by creating a proliferation of meanings

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<sup>83</sup> Ashcroft, Griffins, and Tiffin, 9

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 11

outside of the confines of that imagination. They fuse things that the patriarchal mind has always tried to keep separate- the womb and logic, hallucination and healing, sexual trauma and recovery, thereby reconstituting what it means to be a Mad Superwoman on the comic book page.

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By concluding my thesis with these narratives of resistance, I do not mean to imply that the “battle” for complex and positive representation of women and the female mind on the comic book page is over, or even ending. I do, however, hope to show that the possibility of reconstituting female identity and power in the genre exists. According to recent data, comic book readership among women (particularly young women) is greatly on the rise.<sup>85</sup> Female readers want and deserve to see themselves empowered on the comic book page as complex beings, rather than as a web of patriarchal fears, desires, tropes, and stereotypes. Thus, it is more important than ever to follow in the footsteps of the Barbaras, to find and create work that arrests the machinery of the patriarchal imagination and frees the Mad Superheroine from its confines.

*“My life is my own. I embrace it, and the light, with a deep, continuing joy.”*

- Barbara Gordon

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<sup>85</sup> Asselin, Janelle. "For Second Year In A Row, Female Readers Are A Growing Market."

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