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## Batwoman and Catwoman: Treatment of Women in DC Comics

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BATWOMAN AND CATWOMAN: TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN DC COMICS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

By

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS  
PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Kristen  
Coppess Race ENTITLED Batwoman and Catwoman:  
Treatment of Women in DC Comics . BE ACCEPTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Race, Kristen Coppess. MA Department of English Language and Literature, Wright State University, 1975. *Batwoman and Catwoman: Treatment of Women in DC Comics*.

DC Comics has existed through the first, second, and third waves of feminism, publishing popular female characters who appeal to a mass market. By focusing on depictions of Batwoman and Catwoman, this paper examines the contrast between the social and political progress forms of feminism promised for women and the increasingly violent treatment of female characters in DC Comics, focusing on Batwoman and Catwoman. M. Thomas Inge maintains that male “comic book heroes [...] tend to fit most of the classic patterns of heroism in Western culture” (142). These heroes are designated by their completion of quests or missions, their victory in combat, and their self-improvement through these aggressive acts. However the heroines are denied many of the successful quests and missions that are a common motif for their male counterparts. Heroines’ actions are often reactionary, not active. Moreover, comic heroines tend to fall into certain non-heroic normative archetypes: the domesticated woman (or woman seeking domestication), the transgressive temptress that must be punished (or domesticated), or the moral woman who woos the hero away from the dark side (and joins him in domestic bliss). Following Catwoman from 1940 and Batwoman from 1956, this paper examines the disparity between the rights women gained through feminist movements and the increasing commoditization, fetishization, and torture of females within comic books.

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## I. Introduction

Since its inception in 1938, DC Comics has had a long, problematic history of representing the female body. Female characters are often created to promote readership by playing to cultural stereotypes. They may aid and assist when asked but are put in their place when they do so without permission. Their bodies are muscular and strong but their narratives weak. They may not have their own names but be labeled as diminutive counterparts to their male predecessors.<sup>1</sup> They must be rescued by the men they work with or for. As they are developed by male creators, writers, and artists, they must be disempowered and killed in increasingly graphic methods of fetishized torture. They must be acted upon by male creators, writers, and artists. All of the above is required so that their bodies might be a profitable commodity in an industry that by its own admission boasts 99% male creative control and 93% male readership.<sup>2</sup> So what does it mean when the shape, form, and character of a female heroine remain static for seventy years or more, or that a character has apparently been accepted as is by the culture that consumes her storyline? In this paper, I will examine the chronological progression- or lack of progression- of popular female characters within the DC universe, and how their character is affected- or not affected- by the various movements in feminism and for women's rights. While DC heroines such as Mary Marvel, Superwoman, Black Cat, and even Wonder Woman on occasion have suffered reappropriation and weak rendering,

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<sup>1</sup> Superman/Supergirl and Bulletman/Bulletgirl were among the first and most popular unequal partnerships in superhero comics.

<sup>2</sup> DC Entertainment data collected in an extensive survey of DC readers of the New 52 in 2012 (DCE).

Batwoman and Catwoman are excellent representatives of popular DC heroines who have played a variety of roles: good, bad, gay, straight, and even maternal. They represent a popular polarity of good and evil, as well as being represented in a variety of media.<sup>3</sup>

Although DC Comics are home to the most popular and long-lived comic book heroes, their storylines have lagged behind in depicting outcomes of social change. The storylines remain strongly rooted in white, heteronormative, male-centric narratives, only breaking from socially normative ideals in strategic situations when they have suffered backlash. For example, as women entered the work force during World War II, DC Comics was slow to show women in these occupations. Similarly, it wasn't until nearly a decade after the Civil Rights Movement that DC portrayed strong, black characters. Likewise, during the Gay Rights Movement, Marvel introduced its first homosexual character in 1992, but it took DC until 2006 to introduce Batwoman as an openly gay woman. The disparities between social change and graphic representations are especially observable in DC Comic's portrayal of female characters. When DC first introduced Superman in 1938, his diminutively named female counterpart Supergirl was close behind. Since then, in the pages of comics, women have waged social wars and displayed remarkable strength. But for all their well-defined muscles and scripted ingenuity, they have been denied true agency, self-sufficiency, and even identity on the glossy page.

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<sup>3</sup> Both characters have been depicted in text, in comics, video games, and animated television series. Catwoman has also appeared in three feature length films and a live action television series.

Even more so, female characters who fall outside of carefully delineated gender categories are usually coded grotesque or Other.<sup>4</sup>

Catwoman was created in 1940 and Batwoman in 1956 to play to societal archetypes and have been adapted to conform to social norms. Batwoman was created to replace the sexually provocative Catwoman in 1956 as a heterosexual life-mate to Batman, then was replaced herself by the diminutive Batgirl in 1967. My purpose in this focus is to examine two characters whose narrative, popularity, and reappropriation has lasted for over 70 years. Their continued existence raises questions regarding the depiction of women and what popular opinion, as defined by consumed popular culture, has deemed acceptable in their depiction of women. Despite their popularity across a variety of media and prolific scholarship on Gotham's Dark Knight, both Catwoman and Batwoman have largely escaped critical focus and have not been read as representations of cultural attitudes toward women. However comics can provide a unique, interdisciplinary medium through which to view ideas of gender. Comics do not merely represent or highlight aspects of gender; their characters are literally created, drawn, shaded, and posed. They construct gender in a variety of ways. As female characters have been redrawn, reposed, and recreated through the better part of a century, their forms and actions have been drawn over and over mostly by white, heterosexual men. The vast majority of these fictional women are also white and heterosexual, with very selective

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<sup>4</sup> These will be outlined in Chapter 5 outlining the third wave of feminism and recent trends in marginalizing sexual heroines.

and strategic exceptions in the world of mainstream comics. M. Thomas Inge maintains that male “comic book heroes [...] tend to fit most of the classic patterns of heroism in Western culture,” including their completion of quests or missions, their victory in combat, and their self-improvement through violent conflict (142). In contrast, the heroines are denied many of the successful quests and missions that are a common motif for their male counterparts (142). Their action is often reactionary, not active. Moreover, comic heroines tend to fall into certain non-heroic normative archetypes: the domesticated woman (or woman seeking domestication), the transgressive temptress that must be punished (or domesticated), or the moral woman who woos the hero away from the dark side (and joins him in domestic bliss). Both Batwoman and Catwoman have fallen into these categories.

Despite the popularity of Batwoman and Catwoman, their lack of personal success deprives them of their agency or power. Perhaps this isn't surprising in a medium that is designed arguably for what Laura Mulvey labels in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* “the male gaze.” The male gaze is a challenging environment in which to create powerful autonomous female characters that still inspire the gaze (19).<sup>5</sup> The cell of a comic frames the female's body, frozen in action, prepped for the reader, allowing for

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Mulvey first discussed the gaze in her book, *Visual and Other Pleasures* which focused on the medium of film but is applicable to other visual and graphic media. The gaze is the relationship between the viewer and the viewed in which the viewer is placed in the male subject position with power over power over the viewed (female). The gazes, based on the Lacanian gaze, are gendered because the camera often lingers over or focuses on the female body for the pleasure of a male viewer.

more permanent, less fleeting objectification than film. This commoditization<sup>6</sup> of the female body packages a woman's strength and capabilities in such a way that it is unthreatening to male readers and places the female character in a fetishized position. She may engage in hand-to-hand combat or she may have to be rescued but in either scenario, she is what Jeffery Brown has deemed the "active phallic" or "passive phallic" fetishized woman (256). Brown explains that a fictional women depicted to look as though she has strength, power and agency is often just the "fetishistic figure of fantasy" (45). These characters do not act as strong female but are ascribing masculine ideals of aggression in a poorly enacted "cross-gender performance" that marks them as transgressive (45). That is to say, the strength with which she acts is merely a weak reflection of her masculine counterparts, as is evident in her frequent failure and continuous passivity.

Under the scrutiny of the male gaze, therefore, comic book heroines/villainesses appear unable to thrive alone. The contradiction of physically strong pictorial depictions and characteristically weak narrative raises questions about the future of the women of Gotham and whether or not they can weather a world in which women readers and critics are a growing rank. In the coming chapters I will outline the feminist theoretical components of the first wave (during which comic book heroines were being developed), the second wave (during which comic books pushed female characters into domestic and

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<sup>6</sup> I am using the term "commoditization" in the manner of Jeffery Brown in his examination of the development in action heroines: *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. The term goes beyond the creation or depiction of female characters to specifically focus on their creation or depiction for the purpose of successful economic marketing.

diminutive roles), and into the third wave and beyond (where non-normative female characters were punished or ostracized as other). Within and against the contexts of the first, second, and third waves of feminism, Batwoman and Catwoman developed through the Golden and Silver Age of Comics, surviving radical character alterations to remain marketable. I will examine their place in popular culture now and what their depictions mean for the expectations of acceptance or commoditization of women within the realm of comics.

## **II. Literature Survey**

Until recently, the comic world resisted academic and theoretical scrutiny. In 1993 and 2000, Scott McCloud provided a critical lexicon for the discussion of graphic narrative in his seminal work *Understanding Comics* and in his survey of new graphic approaches in *Reinventing Comics*, respectively. He provided a critical apparatus to examine the comic books and other genres of what Will Eisner terms “sequential art” (147). These works focused on the structure of graphic narrative and how readers cognitively process the images, text, and space. Since McCloud’s publications, new combinations of image and narrative have been adopted to differentiate the structure and content of comics. In her book, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Hilary Chute provides detailed definitions for the growing varieties of sequential art. Chute defines graphic narrative as “a book-length work composed in the medium of comics” focused on portraying history accurately (3). For Chute, the works are non-

fictional or transmit autobiographical, “self-representational storylines” (Chute 3). Graphic novels in contrast are book-length novels in comic form focused on fictional, allegorical, or symbolic narratives written with accompanying images. These texts often stand on their own and only rarely contain recurring characters or require expository knowledge to comprehend. Chute surveys the progressive world of graphic novels as written and drawn by women. She covers Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and other memoir-based graphic narratives. According to Chute, these narratives are progressive and expressive in their representations of gender and gender identity (Chute 4). Graphic narratives such as Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS* and graphic novels such as Alan Moore’s *The Watchmen*<sup>7</sup> have likewise received much canonized literary acclaim and have been the focus of much scholarship. Although both graphic narratives and graphic novels utilize sequential art, comics are unique in their brevity and use of tension, timing, and expository narrative (Eisner 147). Most comic book storylines function as monthly installments (issues of approximately 15 pages) and with little given exposition, require sequential understanding of the previous installments of narrative. Characters within these storylines often exist in several different monthly titles and storylines simultaneously and are enacted upon by multiple creatives.<sup>8</sup> These works aim to appeal to

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<sup>7</sup> Though *The Watchmen* uses superheroes as its central focus, it is a self-contained novel with no expository narrative outside its text and is agreed to be a graphic novel in the critical community. However recently a series of comic books outlining the back story of each of the *Watchmen*, along with issues that fill in gaps in the original novel have been published in monthly comic installments and do require expository understanding. These works are therefore termed “comics.”

<sup>8</sup> “Creatives” is an industry term that refers to the team of pencilers, artists, inkers, colorists, writers, letterers, and occasionally editors who collaborate on a monthly issue.

and entertain the general audience, and they “convey relevance, and set up visual analogies and recognizable life situations” (Eisner 147). Ruth Strang concluded that children—and I would argue contemporary adult readers as well—read comic books out of a “need for adventure denied them in real life” (338).<sup>9</sup> The popularity—and unchanging formula for economic advantage—of superhero comics remains tied to comics ability to help the reader escape from the politics of daily life. By creating their own episodic world, and maintaining tension between issues, comics set up a narrative relative to, but separate from that of the real world. Therein lies the popularity of the words of Gotham or Metropolis.

Characters such as Catwoman have been drawn and written since 1940 and has remained very popular. The power of such comic characters to represent the historical and cultural values is invaluable in examining the evolution of those roles over time. However comics, especially superhero comics, do not pave such progressive trails as graphic novels/narratives in the depiction of females and femaleness. Comic books remain remarkably regressive in their depictions and public controversies, as I will discuss in the coming chapters.

While McCloud’s studies provided a lexicon with which to discuss the narrative process of comics, critical scholarship has tended to focus on the psychological or philosophical implications of superheroes. Although works such as M. Thomas Inge’s

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<sup>9</sup> Similar surveys found comics to be an escape as one child explained to, “take my mind off the war news for a while” (Strang 339). The occurrence of World War II led to the rising popularity of many storylines and characters still popular today.

“Comics as Culture” have explored the appropriation of masculine stereotypes and the value of comics as cultural representation, until very recently the focus remained outside the realm of the social, especially the politics of gender and sexuality. However new movement and backlash in the world of comics has forced discussion about intersectionality and which characters should be coded “normal,” and promoted debate about the stagnant nature of DC Comic narratives.<sup>10</sup>

Wonder Woman is one resounding exception to the typical comic female archetypes, and is most often the focus of critical discussion because she, in most ways, defies the before mentioned stereotypes, remaining the exception rather than the rule. According to Emad, Wonder Woman functions as “both an icon of the traditionally masculine public realm of nationhood as well as the traditionally feminine, private realm of female sexuality” (955-956).<sup>11</sup> Much criticism focuses on Wonder Woman, who is an outlier in her genre. Charles Marston, a psychologist who believed in the superiority, not equality of women, created Wonder Woman to be a feminine ideal (42). She is not a character that is reproduced or mimicked (Marston 42). Marc Singer, in a discussion of race within comics notes that comics encode characters like Wonder Woman are coded with symbolic representation and that this “reductionism” is in actuality “excluding, trivializing, or ‘tokenizing’ minorities [...] who are marked purely for their race” (107).

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<sup>10</sup> Defined by Laura Gillman as “a framework introduced by feminists of color who represent diverse social positions based on class, sexuality, and citizenship” (118).

<sup>11</sup> Her bondage related iconography and plot points have been the focus of much scholarship and criticism focusing on gender and sexual roles. Marston was clear he created Wonder Woman as “this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal, and feminine in every other way” (Emad 982).

While his article focuses on characters like Black Lightning and Black Panther, Singer ignores the identical diminutive naming and coding of female superheroes who are merely supporters, or in some cases ineffective companions, to their male counterparts. This is apparent in the replacement of “man” with “girl” in binary partnerships such as Superman/Supergirl, Spiderman/Spidergirl, etc. Visually they are often depicted one step behind, or with lesser weaponry. In terms of the visual component of these characters, Mulvey's framework for understanding the male gaze within film is easily adapted to the comic cell. Each character is posed, poised, and framed for the male gaze. Often the frame will isolate one part of a woman's body. As Chute points out, unlike film which is based in timing, the reader of a comic decides where their gaze will linger and where it will scan (Chute 8). Occasionally a shockingly poignant moment will draw the eye to pause, look for context, and make a decision about the character depicted. For women, an isolated unclothed body part is usually the focus of a shocking frame,<sup>12</sup> or else a close-up of her screaming mouth in a moment of torture. This pause occurs with male characters as well, but the frames for men tend to highlight the mouth, the fist, or a weapon. A woman's torso, void of head, is often framed for view. Even more common is the stance in which the woman's breasts and buttocks are simultaneously on display: an anatomical impossibility. Even in their own titles, women are subjected to this selective framing.

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<sup>12</sup> For recent Catwoman titles, these sequences almost always highlight a red lacy bra under and unzipped catsuit. For Batwoman it usually involved sexual activity juxtaposed with violent images as will be discussed in Chapter V.

The conventions of sequential paneling are ripe with opportunity to promote or downplay the eroticism of the gaze. In moments of strength, male characters are either shown erect, rigid, flexing, or in action, a veritable phallus stabbing toward his quarry. But what of powerful women? The action heroine may occasionally succeed in hand-to-hand combat; however her strength is often diminutive, her power coded as Other, and her form hyper-sexualized. In discussing action heroines in film, Jeffery Brown states that “action heroines often meld together the properties of both sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism. It is the combination of fetishisms in the figure of the action heroine that reveals the depth of male anxiety associated with tough women” (65). In other words, the sexuality and strength of female characters is often otherized, fetishized, or commoditized to make their capabilities less threatening, and more commercially palpable for male audiences. To make a character Other means to marginalize that character in a way that the audience cannot relate.<sup>13</sup> To fetishize a character is to isolate one aspect—often the breasts, thighs, or hair—by which to depict that character, reducing the character to a sexual symbol.<sup>14</sup> Often this fetishization is done to market the character in an appealing way to a mass audience. As creatives encapsulate the narratives and images of Batwoman and Catwoman into perpetual archetypes, the characters remain

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<sup>13</sup> In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone DeBeauvoir lays out the world view that man is the default, the human as a whole where as “woman” indicates a lack, a deficiency in ability or criteria (15). Her argument rotates around the inherent marginalization of woman: “he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (16).

<sup>14</sup> Jeffery Brown highlights the exaggeration of breasts, thighs, and hair at the height of Bad Girl Art as an example of fetishization. A woman’s power was wrapped up in her sexual appeal in what he called a “hysterical mask of femininity” (Brown 55).

consumable commodities whose popularity is written in their diminutive roles in the Gotham pantheon.

The continuation of this trend over the better part of a century should have drawn criticism of the offending industry. However, as Lillian Robinson points out in her book *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*, the books about comic books tend to be “celebrations of the genre, more or less directly tied to the industry that brings us the comics themselves” (2). Herein lies the gap in scholarship: criticism of the industry through the lens of feminist theory. As Robinson outlines, much “criticism” or reviews of work in the industry is focused on praise. As a result, critical voices have trouble finding publication on the major websites or in major publishers associated with the industry. As I will discuss later, theoretical writing about the misogyny of the comics industry has begun to flourish on the digital platform or even on convention panels but has yet to truly infiltrate academic discussion. For now, I will examine the inability of these characters to escape the archetypes and fetishized treatment over the course of the better part of a century, beginning with the first publications of DC Comics and the rise of the superhero genre.

### **III. The End of First Wave Feminism and Comic Creation**

Comic books first appeared in their current form in 1933 and gained increasing popularity until the introduction of Superman in 1938, the year before the start of World War II (Goulart 118). During the interwar years, advertisements encouraged women to

leave the private domestic sphere and entering the work force to promote the war effort (L. Robinson 33). It was during this time that the basic components of comic books were being developed and honed by public opinion (L. Robinson 33). Superman was given a girlfriend: Lois Lane. She was a working woman, progressive for the time and prescient of a time when women would move out of the private, domestic sphere and into the public workforce to support the war effort. While women were included among the heroes and villains, their treatment in comics was markedly different from their male counterparts. Women were largely identified by the men whose titles they inherited and by roles that were tertiary to the heroes' development.

Batman and Robin were created in 1939 and Catwoman originally appeared in *Batman #1* as a burglar without costume who flirts with Batman until he allows her to escape. Initially called "The Cat," Catwoman, though obviously a villainess, is a strong, single woman who continuously proves her mettle against Batman and Robin. However she is constantly being rescued by Batman, even in situations where she clearly could have enacted her own agency. In her first appearance, Batman catches her stealing a necklace but orchestrates her escape by pushing Robin, presumably so she can jump off the boat (Kane, *Batman #1* 13). It is unclear why this action is needed for her to escape. From this point, however, their dynamic is clear: she will try to seduce him away from his girlfriend and the side of good. Their depicted posture at the close of the first issue shows Catwoman wrapping her arms around Batman's neck as she asks him to join her

before he grabs her wrists and refuses her “proposition” (Kane, “Batman #1 13). He is clearly in control of the situation; he will resist but will rescue her as she needs.

The origin of her character was clear to Bob Kane, who stated that women are inherently feline: aloof and untrustworthy (Daniels 42). Her form was rumored to be modeled off Hedy Lamar or Jean Harlow, as Kane was an avid movie-goer. According to Les Daniels, Kane intended to bring “more glamour” to the storyline (42). She was drawn with the glamorous form of a movie star and written as a cunning, seductive entity.

In the arc of Golden Age villains, she appears to be on a par with any male villain, except in two cases: her frequent death being used as a narrative device, and her ineffective weaponry. Although she is written and drawn to prove effective in hand-to-hand combat, the Golden Age Catwoman is also written as literally having nine lives and dying again and again at the hands of Batman or her fellow villains. Often she proves strong and capable in the field of battle and then makes a silly choice that brings about her death.<sup>15</sup> Her needless and repetitive deaths are clearly punishment for her transgressing the wrong side of law and of ideal femininity.<sup>16</sup>

In another gendered characterization, Catwoman’s iconic whip is often used against her, following a common trope of women being incapacitated by their own

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<sup>15</sup> For example, in “Nine Lives has the Catwoman” issue 35, though she is successful in hand to hand combat with Batman and Robin, she decides to escape on a tractor and plunges over a cliff to her death (Kane 16).

<sup>16</sup> I will be using the term transgression in the manner of Ceylan Ertung in her paper on the gender and bodily sexual restrictions and how they might be overcome in a virtual reality or narrative space but they are not. Ertung uses “transgression” to describe an individual stepping outside their prescriptive role or archetype, especially those associated with gender or gender identity (77).

weaponry. This reversing of weaponry is usually fetishized in the manner of the whipping of Catwoman or the binding of Wonder Woman with ropes.<sup>17</sup> This raises another point: the villains in Batman's world during the 1940s used guns, knives, and other phallic and effective means of harming their victims. They also use creative, tortuous traps involving guillotines, blades, alligators, and other nasty implements of death. As illustrated by Catwoman's whip and Wonder Woman's Lasso, female characters were often armed with ropes or whips, which are essentially flaccid means of pacifying their victims, not causing damage or harm. The few times they use other methods, they are foiled in their attempt or have their weapon turned against them. In "Nine Lives has the Catwoman," for example, Catwoman pulls a gun on Batman and he disarms her with her own whip, a trick Catwoman herself rarely uses (Kane, 11). Although she fulfills the popular archetype of the villain with a heart of gold, Catwoman is clearly incapable of seducing Batman or surviving without his rescue.

She and other female characters of her time existed for two purposes: as heroines who were created to be rescued by the hero, or as villainesses who needed moral rescuing. This psychological motif fit into the genre's canonized expectation of heroes and the women who share their physically drawn space: that of rescuer and rescuee. This dynamic permeates DC Comics, especially during the Golden Age when a fainting

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<sup>17</sup> Wonder Woman was written that the only way to defeat her was to bind her with rope, her own weapon being a lasso. As a result, a great deal of her plot revolves around her being tied up. Her other equipment was defensive: bullet proof bracelets and an invisible plane. Likewise Catwoman spends a lot of her early years being whipped and bound by her own whip.

woman on a cover was common place. Catwoman occupies a unique position in that she flirts openly with Batman, clearly represents evil, and is not shown fainting. She occasionally kicks or punches the men who get in her way. However, her character on a whole still requires rescuing—either from herself, or from her immoral lifestyle. Batman does make several attempts to reform her but is unsuccessful before her banishment in 1956. Here the banishment of Catwoman overlaps the entry into the Second Wave. Having transgressed heteronormativity, she is not allowed to exist—through publication—in the public sphere.

#### **IV. Binaries and Banishments: Second Wave Feminism and Silver Age**

##### **The Comic Code:**

In the wake of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, comic books underwent vast changes in editorial policy. Although De Beauvoir published her manifesto in 1949, rediscovery and application of the text in the early sixties are by some critiques as changing feminist equality issues into feminist theory (Pilardi 31). In *The Second Sex* De Beauvoir analyzed the notion that within the patriarchal system, woman was Other, and was denied rights accordingly. The work was so ground-breaking that its influence moved beyond the second wave. In her commentary on *The Second Sex*, for example, Jo-Anne Pilardi credits the work with giving context to feminist argument for decades: "Whether or not we call *The Second Sex* a cause of twentieth century feminism or simply claim that its discovery by feminists was an *effect*

of the emergent feminist movement, its usefulness to the movement was already indisputably accepted in the 1970s” (31). De Beauvoir’s views, and decision to eschew motherhood and marriage were quite different than the post-war push for heteronormative domesticity. This domesticity was avidly promoted in comic books with a rash of marriages: Batwoman to Batman, Lois Lane to Superman, and the resulting patriarchal family structures. Within these comics, the television series of the period, comic strips, and even advertisements, a certain brand of groomed, docile, female helpmate was being heralded as the feminine ideal. In contrast to this trend in comics, Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique* challenged limiting women to the private sphere in 1963, and began a trend of feminist works that demanded women participate equally in the public sphere.

In the 1970s, a rash of sex-positive novels by female authors emerged (Gerhard 118). In her book *Desiring Revolution: Second Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought*, Jane Gerhard describes how these novels provide, “despite their flaws, a window onto how feminism and sexuality become bound together” (118). She explains the role of these novels in fighting the patriarchal ownership of heterosexuality. Novels and other media represented female sexuality and the heterosexual relationship in a supposedly more female-friendly manner. While popular culture was heralded by some feminist as a formula for male-dominant culture, many positive songs, like Helen Reddy’s “I Am Woman” and feminist publications like *Ms. Magazine* and *Spare Rib* brought fresh discussion about how women can influence

popular culture and how popular culture can bring awareness to women who feel deprived of a public voice (Arrow 215). However, the male-centric comics industry resisted any such infiltration, even reacting negatively to the progress being made in the terms of civil and sexual equality. In fact, comics took a step backward. The more women gained in the public sphere, the more comic writers restricted their women to the private realm in docile, subordinate roles. Michael Foucault argues that “new concepts of political liberty [were] accompanied by a darker countermovement, by the emergence of a new and unprecedented discipline directed against the body,” a movement that Sandra Lee Bartky points out is used to keep women restricted to their heteronormative gender roles (Bartky 130). While women were coming to an understanding of the restrictions they face in the public and private sphere, the women in comics were being hobbled by a series of mechanisms such as malfunction-prone costuming, ineffective weaponry, and bungling crime-fighting skills. Almost as though they were being punished for succeeding in the public sphere, heroines were scripted to fail more and more often, or to even require banishment or bondage by their male counterparts.

Futhermore, politicians, critics, and parent groups aligned illustrated female bodies with gory images, horror-genred storylines, vampires, violence toward police officers, and zombies. The Cincinnati Parents Committee even placed female forms on par with the “grotesque, fantastic, or unnatural” depiction of sinister monsters like Clayface (Nyberg). During this time, The Comic Code banished Catwoman’s femme fatale figure from comic books for twelve years, along with any other woman who did

not meet the Code's stringent and gender specific regulations that banned suggestive posture, allusion to sex, or exaggerated physical features.<sup>18</sup> Only women in docile domestic roles were exempt from the ban such as Lois Lane. She was given her own title, *Superman's Girlfriend*, in which she constantly bungled cases and was rescued by Superman.

Fredric Wertham and the parent watchdog groups had some cause for concern.<sup>19</sup> Comics at the time were specifically directed toward young boys and some storylines were disturbingly graphic in their depictions of eyes being stabbed by needles and corpses flayed open (Wertham *pictorial insert*). Unfortunately, when Wertham wrote his manifesto on the evils of depicting violence, gore, and torture, he also decided to target female bodies. He argued that women's bodies held hidden sexual pictures or promoted dominance over males. In page after page of Wertham's chosen images he points out "headlights" (perky breasts) and bondage imagery (Wonder Woman tying up or being tied up by villains) as examples of salacious desire-inducing temptation to young men. Wertham points out Catwoman specifically saying, "In these stories there are practically no decent, attractive, successful women. A typical female is the Catwoman, who is

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<sup>18</sup> From Comic Code General Standards Part C: Costume

- (1) Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.
- (2) Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
- (3) All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
- (4) Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.

<sup>19</sup> The Cincinnati Parents Committee was one of the most vocal supporters of the Comic Code and assisted with literature circulation, comic book burnings, and legal discourse regarding the evils of comics (Nyberg, 23).

vicious and uses a whip. The atmosphere is homosexual and anti-feminine” (191). Wertham maligns Catwoman for not fulfilling her prescribed gender role, and transgressing morally. Being morally conflicted did not play well when viewed through Wertham’s panic-inducing doctrine. In an effort to spread the word of this public menace, Wertham distributed records and brochures. Because of the proliferation of such material backed by unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence disguised as scientific inquiry, a large number of publications picked up Wertham’s concerns and rhetoric. The Cincinnati Parents Committee, in particular, influenced the publication of articles in widely circulated magazines such as *Parenting Magazine* (Nyberg).

After the publication and distribution of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a Senate Judiciary Committee for Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency was formed to find a solution for the havoc wreaked by violence, gore, and women’s bodies. They adopted the Comic Code, which decisively laid out the images and themes banned from comics and established the Comic Code Authority to enforce it. Books not bearing the seal of the Code had trouble finding markets. Where they did settle, the rage of parent groups like the Cincinnati Parents Committee soon found them out and initiated book burnings, protested at stores, harassed store owners, and published lists of enemies to decency in churches (Nyberg 22-28). In the wake of these “Decency Crusades,” DC Comics was fearful to publish their popular heroine/villainess because the Code arbitrarily targeted popular story lines that depicted a narrative different from white males fighting crime cleanly and concisely while never facing internal conflict or temptation. In direct contrast

to the heroines of pro-female novels of the 1970s—or the women behind the growing theory of gender equality, for that matter—the fictional women within comic books were not only hidden in diminutive, second-class positions, those written as strong were actively banned from publication. Strong, seductive, and morally ambiguous, Catwoman stood no chance.

### **Costuming**

Second wave feminism focused largely on the male-constructed aesthetic ideals of women and how those ideals are perpetuated through marketing, pop cultural depictions, and publications directed toward women such as beauty magazines. This marketing was criticized as a means to bind women into the time and energy required to appear just so while rendering them crippled by towering heels or unable to do heavy work because of manicured nails. The female characters in DC Comics were similarly hampered by unpractical shoes and pantyhose runs. In her book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller outlined the mechanics with which a dominant group seeks to define and therefore marginalize a subordinate group. She reflects on the definitions of woman as embodying “submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think, and the like” (Miller 7). Women that fall into these categories “are considered well-adjusted” and properly fulfilling their role (Miller 7). This holds true in female comic characters who are distinguished from their male counterparts by their inability to act, their defensive action, and a lack of initiative or

intelligence in pursuing a villain. Much of their inefficiency is written into their appearance, long hair that gets tangled while on a case, runs in pantyhose while in a fight, and utility belts that hold gendered tools that are defensive in nature and not the weaponry of male heroes.<sup>20</sup> While their costumes often appear similar to their male partners', the narrative betrays a fragility, vulnerability, and lack of efficacy in their costuming and weaponry.

In his discussion of realistic to symbolic rendering, McCloud introduces a scale along which a character is drawn to specificity (realism) or to symbolism (*Understanding Comics* 52-53). Peter Coogan addresses the costume as a motif by which to symbolize a character and the skintight catsuit as a means to focus the reader's attention on the symbolism of the character rather than the character his/herself (Heer and Worchester 79). What does it mean if the symbolic suit is constantly unravelling- or if the suit is carried over to a different character? In her last appearance before censorship, the exposure of Catwoman's calves, knee and a sliver of thigh are not particularly sexual or realistic in nature. Yet they are not acceptable according to the subjective stipulations in the Comic Code regarding female nudity. Nor are her Harlow-esque proportions acceptable under the ruling that women must be drawn with no exaggeration to physical

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<sup>20</sup> On the cover of *Detective Comics* #371 (1968) "Batgirl Costume Cut-ups," Batman and Robin are battling thugs. Batman calls out "Batgirl- get over here---Help us! We've got a problem!" to which Batgirl, examining her costume replied, "I've got a bigger one—a run in my tights!" (Fox and Infantino cover). Later in the issue, she is shown putting on makeup while Batman and Robin fight saying, "By the time Batgirl pretties herself up for the brawl—It'll all be over" (Fox and Infantino 8).

features.<sup>21</sup> Robin's bare legs and Batman's impossibly muscular torso and thighs are perfectly acceptable under the code. In fact, a man's body was never banned based on the before-mentioned stipulations unless he was black.<sup>22</sup>

In 1956, a year after Catwoman's banishment, Batwoman appeared on the scene clad in a skin tight cat suit with an outlined bustier that held what appear to be physically exaggerated qualities similar to Catwoman's. In contrast to Catwoman's long, flowing skirt, Batwoman wore tights. Her first appearance even depicts her straddling a large motorcycle. The symbolism is clear: Batwoman is taking on the role of Catwoman, but with the blessing of the moral authorities. Why was she given a pass? According to Simone De Beauvoir, a woman is not, and cannot be "distinguished from her appearance" (724). In the case of hero and villain, her "goodness" or "badness" is distinguished primarily by dress. In the case of 1956 Batwoman, it is distinguished by a single color, yellow over purple, from Catwoman's identical costume. To place such a large moral weight on yellow over purple seems arbitrary. There are more important moral reasons Batwoman was allowed to circumvent the Code: she was introduced to lure Batman away from his alleged sexual relationship with Robin. Her symbolically identical uniform show she will, like Catwoman, not pose a threat to the crime-fighting duo and will remain

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<sup>21</sup> Comic book code of 1954, Part C "Marriage and Sex," point 5

<sup>22</sup> The omittance of black characters during the 60s raised a lot of fervor within the comic industry. Several titles rewrote Comic Code approved storylines to include one black character to watch the storyline get rejected. Don and Maggie Thompson's newsletter *Newfangles* chronicled these injustices and criticized the lack of social equality for minority figures. It was a unique publication to criticize both the Code and the industry though the Thompsons were both creatives working within the industry.

under Batman's control. She is less a realistic character of depth and agency, and more an empty female costume that is easily replaced. Her inefficacy is also apparent through her weaponry.

Although Batwoman was allowed to wear pants and ride a motorcycle, her weaponry was as useless as Catwoman's whip. Her original skills were based on her past as a circus performer and her weapons were absurdly feminized: sneezing powder from a compact, an expandable hairnet, and charm bracelets. All of these tools are kept in a "utility bag" which is clearly a purse. One hand must be used to stabilize the purse on cases, while Batman and Robin have their hands free because they wear utility belts. Batwoman is hampered by her tools, where Batman and Robin gain strength and efficiency through their weapons. Catwoman's whip, though useless in narrative, was threatening in an animalistic, even sexual manner. Batwoman's tools- they can hardly be called weapons- are in no way threatening as they can only stun or pacify, not cause damage. Thus DC and Bob can successfully integrate Batwoman as a harmless, docile replacement for a seductive moral threat was successful.

### **Rescue through Domesticity: "The Problem that has No Name"<sup>23</sup>**

In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Batman and Robin were "outed" as lovers living a domestic homosexual fantasy life of parties, matching tuxes, and luxurious floral

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<sup>23</sup> From Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

arrangements (Wertham 190).<sup>24</sup> Catwoman's attempts to seduce Batman were cursed as attempts to tempt Batman to the dark side of Gotham, and away from his chances at heteronormative matrimony. Giving into the pressure of Wertham's attack, Bob Kane wanted to imitate the success of the Superman "family" model by creating a Batman heteronormative family structure with Batman in the patriarchal role, Batwoman as the matriarch, and Robin as a child. Complete with Bat-Hound as the family pet, the storyline was prepared to mirror the success of the Superman family. DC creators were quick to deny the switch had happened for the purposes of solidifying Batman's position as a heteronormative patriarch. Batwoman critic Fred Graninetti explains her creation thus:

While the homosexual thinking might have been a factor in Batwoman's creation, DC Comics was also looking for new ways to attract a wider readership to Batman. This might have been an attempt to grab the female audience. Batwoman first appeared in *Detective Comics*#233 (1956) in the lead story, *The Batwoman* written by Edmond Hamilton and illustrated by Sheldon Moldoff. In her first adventure Batwoman proves, except to Batman, she is a capable crimefighter. (Haberfelner)

Despite Graninetti's assertions that Batwoman is a strong capable women, once she joined the dynamic duo, her role was increasingly diminished. Batwoman is rarely seen leaving the home and is more often referred to as "Kathy" than Batwoman. This

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<sup>24</sup> Wertham spends a great deal of time sharing anecdotal (all unsubstantiated) evidence to prove Batman and Robin's depiction as a couple turned young boys toward homosexuality.

transition from the public life as a crime fighter to the private domestic role is largely based on the knowledge that a villain could find out her identity. Batman and Robin prove this through an elaborate plot to show her the vulnerability of her public self and relegating her to the home for her own supposed safety. It is never considered that this plot carried out against either Batman or Robin would have yielded the same results. It is only Batwoman's public persona that is vulnerable.

Almost immediately upon joining the Batman Family, Kane writes Kathy as a blundering nuisance whose inferior intellect bungles cases and places her in a position where she needs rescue from Batman and Robin. Batman pressures Kathy to retire. He goes so far as to tell her "A wife's place is in the home," several times as he and Robin dash off on a case (Kane and Swan 27).<sup>25</sup> Panel after panel shows Kathy sitting in Wayne manor lamenting her life without vocation. Eventually, Kathy becomes bored of moping and dons her costume, much to Batman's dismay. From this point on, she fights alongside Batman, and despite her absurd weapons and apparent fear of mice, she captures criminals on her own. By the early sixties, Batwoman even saves Batman's life on five different occasions.<sup>26</sup> Of course his rescuing of her vastly outweighed these successes but she is given thoughtful agency and cunning despite her useless weaponry.

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<sup>25</sup> Batman goes so far as to hide her costume after she tries to help on a case (Kane and Swan 27). Many similar efforts are made to hamper her development and keep her restricted to Wayne Manor.

<sup>26</sup> "The Secret Life of Bat-Hound" *Batman* #125 (1959), "The Return of Bat-Mite" *Detective Comics* #276 (1960), "The Menace of the Firefly" *Batman* #126 (1960), "The Bronze Menace" *Detective Comics* #302 (1962) and "The Terrible Trio" *Detective Comics* #321 (1963) (Haberfelner).

## Regression

In a similar attempt to extol heterosexual monogamy, DC gave Lois Lane her own story line where she got jealous of Superman, fought off rival suitors, and eventually married the man of steel (Dorfman and Schaffenberg). Catwoman's return from banishment occurred in this particular title where she is thwarted from turning Superman into a cat by Superman's monogamous, heterosexual partner. Even in her own series, Lois was often the victim awaiting Superman's rescue. She fulfilled the diminutive character that men of her era wanted, promoting what Simone De Beauvoir outlined in 1949 as the male need to control women's liberation:

Clearly man wants woman's enslavement when fantasizing himself as a benefactor, liberator, or redeemer; if Sleeping Beauty is to be awakened, she must be sleeping; .... And the greater man's taste for difficult undertakings, the greater his pleasure in granting woman's independence. (De Beauvoir 201)

In Code-approved pieces, morally upstanding women pose no threat to society in their weakened, domesticated state. Batman eventually triumphs in his reformation and rescue of the Catwoman when he marries her in 1977 after rescuing her from prison (Levitz, Staton, and Layton). She becomes a housewife and mother where she is drawn as being happy and fulfilled in this role.<sup>27</sup> After vows are exchanged, the narration marks the progress made in their lives: Batman retires from crime fighting to become a social

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<sup>27</sup> A similar story runs in 1983 in *The Bold and The Brave* #197.

activist, Robin outgrows the tights and leaves, and Selina has a baby girl (Levitz, Staton, and Layton 3). Bruce Wayne's happiness and pride stems from the birth of his daughter, the accomplishments of his mentee, and his new professional life. s happiness appears to be grounded in her child and home. She is only allowed this happiness when she repents of her "deviance" and joins a heteronormative family unit. The story ends with a man from her past blackmailing her into another robbery, during which she is shot to death as penance for her past crimes and punishment for leaving her home. The pattern of transgression/punishment and domestication/fulfillment is clear in a few short pages.

In March 1959, Issue #122 of *Batman* depicts Batman and Batwoman exiting a church having presumably been wed.<sup>28</sup> Robin appears distressed in the foreground asking "Gosh! What'll become of me now?" (Swan and Kaye).<sup>29</sup> With Batman's marriage to Batwoman, Robin moves from the role of homosexual lover into the role of child in a family unit. However he clearly has more power, agency, and ability than the new Mrs. Wayne. In retaliation for Catwoman's deviance, Batwoman was allowed to thrive because her body was rendered to save Batman's sexuality, yet she remains in the archetype of the domesticated woman shielded from the dangers of the public sphere. Her costume from the waist up was identical in every curve to Catwoman's. In fact, their hair, facial features, and posture are remarkably identical as well. But Batwoman's body is not

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<sup>28</sup> This issue marketed with great flourish and given to children at Pizza Hut.

<sup>29</sup> With the decline of comic sales, this cover was a stunt to lure in readers who missed the former complex villains. The marriage sequence was a dream of Robin's. This particular comic was also circulated as a prize at Pizza Hut.

a threat or drawn to “stimulate the lower and baser emotions,” rather, she is drawn to bring Batman to the side of “good”—away from crime and/or homosexuality (Wertham). She is arbitrarily exempt from the Comic Code of 1954, Part C “Marriage and Sex,” point 5 because her body is drawn to align Batman’s moral character with point 7: “Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.”<sup>30</sup> Homosexuality was cured with her introduction.

While the Code lost steam in the sixties, many publishers were hesitant to feature “salacious” or “suggestive” female forms on their covers, regardless of what shenanigans the women got into between the pages. In fact, Catwoman’s first Code-approved appearance in 1966 depicted her modestly clad from head to toe cat-fighting with Lois Lane in the before-mentioned series (Dorfman and Schaffenberger). On the inner pages, Catwoman appeared in her original costuming under the code, marking the relaxation of previously strenuous restrictions.<sup>31</sup>

But what became of Batman’s hetero-life partner? In 1967, the unpopular and disempowered matriarch, Batwoman, was replaced with the more popular Batgirl.<sup>32</sup> In 1979, Batwoman became the first superhero in DC to be killed. Her death happens quickly offstage in a senseless plot point.<sup>33</sup> Despite the plot’s title, “The Vengeance

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<sup>30</sup> Katherine Kane, Batwoman, was later reconfigured to be Gay and Jewish in 2006 (Johns et. al). This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> This also marked the year Eartha Kitt played Catwoman on the television series and Batgirl was becoming more of a sidekick with plans to have her replace Robin (Eisner 24-25).

<sup>32</sup> *Detective Comics* #359 titled, "The Million Dollar Debut of Batgirl!" (1967) by writer Gardner Fox and artist Carmine Infantino.

<sup>33</sup> *Detective Comics* #485 (1979)

Vow,” her compatriots barely acknowledge her absence. DC denied allegations that this was due to lack of popularity (Haberfelner). From there the character’s resurrections and deaths continue primarily as a manipulation of Batman’s heart, and a cheap narrative ploy. She remained the shadow of a woman who existed primarily in Batman’s past as a love interest.

The Batwoman of the Silver Age never reached a status of equality to her male counterparts and the Catwoman who emerged from the Silver Age was remarkably diminished in terms of agency and strength. The Silver Age moved into the contentious Bronze Age with conflicted, weakened, and unpopular characters, as the industry began to tear itself apart to try to boost sales. Great steps would have to be taken in rethinking the depiction of female characters that readers would clamor to see. This movement corresponded with the struggles within the ranks of feminist factions in their search for understanding and collaboration. At the close of the second wave, conflicts over representation and theoretical application erupted between various feminist factions: queer theorists, African-American theorists, post-colonial feminists, Eurocentric feminists, radical feminist, classical feminists, etc. (Mortensen 1). Certain groups began to collaborate and recognize intersectional issues. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty said, “What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression” (825). The comic book storylines that arose alongside the third wave depicted women forming such alliances, working together, and fighting across race, sexuality, and gender lines. In most cases these women were fighting against hyper-

masculinized antagonists. Sadly most of these narratives ended poorly for the depicted characters.

## **V. Departure, Deconstruction, and the New 52: Third Wave and on...**

In the 80's, the feminist infighting began to focus on women's sexual agency. A schism emerged between those who saw pornography as empowering, and those who saw it as a degrading attempt to garner power in a male system.<sup>34</sup> In what some deemed a positive step for female sexuality, "Bad Girl Art" became more and more popular and the characters became less anatomically possible and more and more scantily clad.<sup>35</sup> The old controversy of sexual heroines who transgress gendered norms was again the target for parent groups. In her book, *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, Sherrie A. Inness cites popular films and television series in which women are shown fighting against the notion that women cannot be as aggressive or as effective as men. The success of female characters in popular culture rose out of the pushback against this idea during the second wave (Inness 5). But still, comic heroines had yet to have this aggression and efficacy scripted into their characters. With the rise of women's

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<sup>34</sup> In her book, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, Wendy McElroy attacks "radical feminist" ideals that the only way to sexual freedom is lesbianism, and claimed that radical feminists chose pornography as a scapegoat for the repression of women in desperation to keep the movement alive. Anti-Porn Theorists such as Catherine Mackinnon saw porn as abusing and raping women for profit, commodifying women as objects, and coercing women into actions that were not expressing their sexuality but exploiting it ("Pornography: Not a Moral Issue").

<sup>35</sup> Bad Girl Art was an aesthetic response to pinup girl art in which the subject was obviously a villain or woman of questionable morals. They are often depicted with large guns or swords in bikini-like coverings. Prominent examples are Lady Death, Vampirella, and Glory.

equality and the intensifying Feminist Radicalism, an awareness of the oppression of women through women's bodies began to enter the artistic consciousness.<sup>36</sup> By the eighties, during the third wave of feminism, the market flooded with strong, sexual heroines and villainesses, some of whom were minorities and/or homosexual. As publishers realized their G-rated books would be the death of the business, they allowed more and more women to return from exile. Flaunting the institutional Code and often forgoing submission for approval, female characters ruled their own titles, striding against the grain of two-dimensionality to which they had been previously restricted.

During this period, feminists focused on establishing methods of sexual identity and expression outside of the patriarchal construct. In the 80s, as the argument over pornography and BDSM was causing a schism within feminist movements, a surge of “Bad Girl Art” led to the creation of hyper-sexualized characters. By the 90s, the popularity of dominatrix-styled female characters such as Lady Death, Glory, and Vampirella led to the redesign of even Catwoman. Her sexualization reached its zenith in the 1992 film *Batman Returns* in which her character wears a latex suit and adopts a more domineering, sexual attitude (Burton). As these characters took shape in a still heavily masculine genre, several marginalizing factors occurred. Susan Bordo describes masculine power mechanisms as establishing our sense of what is acceptable and what is

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<sup>36</sup> Though it is important to mention that black heroes were still banned under the Code. William Gaines published an anti-racism storyline with a black hero to replace yet another storyline had been refused approval. Gaines threatened to publicize the reasons for the censorship and the Code Authority withdrew (Thompson & Thompson).

transgressive: “the mechanisms that shape and proliferate—rather than repress—desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance” (167). Regardless of moral alignments—good or evil—the sexually progressive characters are regarded as transgressive and aligned with the grotesque. A morbid, gothic motif runs through their storylines. Moreover their faces and bodies are pasty white as if indicating an undead or ghostlike aesthetic. Both Batwoman and Catwoman have been depicted this way as their sexuality became more overt.

The focus on criticism against female characters arose not out of their highly sexualized physical form, but on their sexual actions. Meanwhile, narratives describing personal and fetishized attacks against these characters increased. In her 2006 introduction to her 1969 essay, “The Political is Personal,” Carol Hanisch asserts that politics are not limited to the electoral realm but exist wherever on power dynamics exist. Speaking out in the second wave, Hanisch clarifies that she spoke “out of a place of struggle.” When these power dynamics become too much of a struggle for one population, individuals from that population should come together, discuss, and act (or choose not to act) on behalf of that group. Her original essay states: “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (Hanisch). Her statement that the personal afflictions or feelings of oppression of one woman holds political resonance for the entire gender. Likewise, the torture and

victimization inflicted upon a fictional female character reflects the political attitudes of what is acceptable treatment toward women in the real world.

The third wave also focuses on global violence against women with events like V-Day. These events focus discussion on the private issues of rape, domestic violence, and murder of women and seek to raise social awareness and political action. However, from the 90s until now, the violence, raped, and torture of comic heroines has become increasingly prolific (and graphic). The rape and murder of female characters became so prolific that Gail Simone started a website entitled “Women in Refrigerators” to uncover the prolific trope of women being murdered, tortured, raped, or used as props for revenge plots within comics.<sup>37</sup> The website spurred a movement of blogs, websites, and anthologies in the late 90s dedicated to examining the audience’s acceptance of this treatment toward women in fiction. Simone received torrents of hate mail accusing her of pushing a feminist agenda (Sarkeesian). Despite her proliferation and reputation as a writer, many in her field took personal offense to her observation that the super-powered women in comics die more violently, are more often traumatized, and are depowered far more often than their male counterparts (Sarkeesian). Although the women of DC Comics are drawn with fierceness and aggression, their most common trope for growth and inspiration is rape. The proliferation of rape and torture narratives within a popular

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<sup>37</sup> The title for the blog came from an issue of Green Lantern in which the hero returns home to discover his love interest has been brutally murdered and stuffed in the refrigerator. The site pointed out that these violent incidents showed women as dispensable narrative props. Several versions of the website, including the original still exist today.

medium should raise ire but such incidents continue to flourish within mainstream comics.

As women carved out roles apart from supporters, sidekicks, or victims it became clear that men drawing their forms began to consider the self-sufficiency and physical stature with which women of comics should be imbued. Their physical forms broke from previous mold and where physical features used to be exaggerated pre-Code they seemed to take in a life of their own. Not just secondary sex characteristics were redrawn but their thighs and arms gained muscular definition consistent with martial art or gymnastic training. Beginning in the 90s, some more popular storylines were entrusted to female writers and a surge of strong females took shape. To be clear, the percentage of female creative writers or editors still remained quite low but certain writers like Gail Simone began to achieve levels of popularity and critical acclaim like that of Alan Moore or Stan Lee. The new millennium brought a rush of female-centric storylines and females with their own titles. Catwoman gained her own title and a starring role in the ground-breaking *Gotham City Sirens*. When Batwoman declared her homosexuality in 2006, it marked the first outing of a primary heroine. Her outing was met with criticism but also with a surprising amount of praise from mainstream media (B. Robinson). However, Batwoman and Catwoman remain coded as deviant because they function outside the heteronormative sphere. During the DC reboot in 2011, for example, both were given their own titles. The integration of sexual identity, homosexuality, and collaboration among women of different backgrounds, with the aid of technology, aligns DC comics

with the goals of third wave feminism, and places them in a position to do much good in creating strong female role-models. Unfortunately these attempts fell short as before, placing Catwoman in the perpetual role of woman in need of rescue and marginalizing Batwoman as Other and grotesque. Although these women were coded with more strength, agility, and agency, they remain archetypal tropes in the DC universe.

### **Gotham City Sirens: The Short-Lived Myth of Female Self-Sufficiency**

In discussing the origin of the Amazon Wonder Woman, Robinson explains that “A man-free (occasionally a gender-free) society is often at the center of feminist utopian or fantasy fiction” (18). Dating back to Pizan’s *The City of Ladies* in 1405, the ideal of a female constructed society has been a means by which to imagine a fictional system organized outside the patriarchal mechanism. Women in these fictional societies find the most success in the absence of the archetypal male protector.<sup>38</sup> Although not part of the character relaunch, *Gotham City Sirens* was a short-lived run that spanned the DC reboot but concluded soon after. Catwoman joins Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn to form a triumvirate that represents various strata of female sexuality: the submissive, the dominant, and the conflicted. Although these feminine archetypes are affirmed again and again, the women never reach a level of self-sufficiency or security in the post-Batman Gotham. Their union, and the absence of Batman, is a clear indicator that their

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<sup>38</sup> Pizan wrote about a utopia populated entirely by women who created their own educational, judicial, and domestic system without the aid of men. Such, all female utopias in comics are the genesis of some of the strongest female characters, such as Wonder Woman and her Amazonian upbringing.

protagonistic, yet sharply anti-heroic roles exist in a “counterculture” of “faulty replacements” (Clark 29). In other words, the female characters are flawed stand-ins for the Dark Knight. They start out with agency and power, but that agency is gradually diminished as they struggle to merely survive repeated fetishized attacks. Why this treatment? They are counter to the culture of both Gotham’s criminal underground and its public face. They do too much good to be deemed villainesses and are focused more on survival than criminal activity. They cause a spectacular amount of destruction so they cannot be identified as good. They are the epitome of the antihero, and a satirical grotesque through which the audience can experience pathos (Clark 14, 35).<sup>39</sup> Consequently, they become passive bodies that are targeted for fetishized torture while they lack the autonomy to stop it. In a reversal of the titular allusion to sirens, each girl is continuously falling into peril at the hands of men who desire her destruction. It is up to the other girls to clamber to save first Selena from the Bone-Crusher, Ivy from an egotistical botanical deity, and as always, Harley from The Joker. Although the Penguin, the Joker, Two-Face, Riddler, and the other male villains have no trouble surviving in between their inevitable one-on-one battles against the Dark Knight, the girls apparently need the tenuous, and often treacherous, protection of each other.

In a reversal of Pizan’s utopian picture, the series opens with Catwoman recovering from a literal broken heart at the hands of Batman,<sup>40</sup> Harley Quinn pining over

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that in making this argument, Clark always uses masculine markers: Hero, he, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Actually Hush, disguised as Batman, literally cut out Catwoman’s heart to enact revenge on Batman using Catwoman as a tool- a typical “Women in Refrigerators” moment (Dini and Nguyen, #849).

the Joker, and Poison Ivy exerting toxin-induced domination over The Riddler. The rationale for the conjoining of such radically different women is the theory that they will strengthen one another financially and emotionally. However, in the entire series, the women never triumph beyond mere survival. Beginning the series with Catwoman recovering from an incident of fetishized torture and injury marks the tone of the series on a whole. The women become the fetishized focus of villain after villain and are clearly packaged as fetishized commodities in Guillem March's artwork.<sup>41</sup>

Harley Quinn has long represented the abused girlfriend archetype. She is emotionally manipulated and physically assaulted by the Joker who turned her from a criminal psychologist to his psychotic sidekick. Poison Ivy and Harley became friends when Ivy rescued her from the Joker's murderous and almost successful prank against her life (Rucka et. al). In issue 21, Harley ponders, "If there ever comes a day that I am studied and analyzed---Discussed in classrooms [...] what will they say? [...] Am I to be remembered as the love-twisted sidekick of the Joker?" She is depicted as a physically dexterous, powerful woman who is nevertheless reduced to a puddle by a man. Her character has in no way developed since its inception in 1992.<sup>42</sup> The originator of the role, Arleen Sorkin remarked that, "I see Harley as a girl who wants to do the right thing, but it's just *not* within her control. She wants to be a good girl but it's so much more *her* to be a bad one. I think she's popular because of her vulnerability" (Jankiewicz). Even

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<sup>41</sup> March is best known for drawing pornographic depictions of pin-up girls.

<sup>42</sup> Harley Quinn's first appearance was on the animated series in 1992 (Batman: The Animated Series)

though Harley is a foil to the other girls she is obviously the most unhinged and has no autonomy over her manic power.

Harley's polar opposite, Poison Ivy is an anomaly in the Gotham Pantheon in that she actually has super powers beyond strength and agility. Over the course of her character's growth she has achieved almost goddess-like abilities to manipulate plant life. In *Gotham City Sirens* she demonstrates this power by violently interrogating Zatanna through manipulation of cut flowers (Dini and March, #1) and spying on Harley using urban shrubs (Dini and March #4). Ivy also exerts pheromone based control over men and dominates every romantic relationship or friendship she undertakes. Yet in this series she is constantly dominated, constrained, and controlled.

As mentioned before, Catwoman similarly fluctuates between heroine and villainess, between dominant and submissive. She is complex and multi-faceted. Her depiction is the most specifically muscular and sleek of the three yet she is characterized as the weakest to the point her allies question whether or not she has lost her power (Dini and March, #1).

As illustrated on the covers of issues 1, 2, and 4 all three women are drawn with identical physical features and demonstrations of power through stance and iconography. Catwoman's symbolic whip, claws, and goggles find prominent placement on all three covers as do Ivy's vines and Harley's card symbols. In later issues, Harley's mallet becomes a prominent icon and better depiction of her strength. The relationship starts off rocky with what Helene Cixous called man's greatest triumph: getting women to hate

other women (878). This hatred is manifest in the sentiment, “Insidiously, violently, [men] have led [women] to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize immense strength against themselves” (Cixous 878). The inherent mistrust, deception, and lone-wolf instincts keep the relationships between these villainesses tense. Their supposed union is actually so destructive that there seems no viable continuation for the story line. It isn’t long before the women are no longer narrating their own story. The authors of *Gotham City Sirens* allowed the girls two issues of perceived unity and power before The Riddler took over the narrative in the third issue. He not only narrates but dominates the entire third issue with a story almost wholly separate from that of the Sirens. On this cover, his iconography (the question mark) infiltrates the sirens’ space and returns for issues eight through ten. Other male figures appear to manipulate and “play” with the sirens, often subverting their roles in crime fighting or desperate to inscribe themselves on the Siren brand. A carryover from the Silver Age motif of rescuer/rescuee, the women become playthings for larger institutions and the focus of fetishized torture. For example, Ivy’s genetic material is taken from her by a stalker (through needle) and she is attacked and buried alive for being falsely accused of murder. Likewise, Harley’s mental capacity is hampered by The Joker’s influence and Gaggy targets her because The Joker liked Harley more. Over the course of these conflicts she is bound by rope in a variety of sexualized postures. Finally, Catwoman continues to nurse the wounds inflicted on her by her deranged sister who targets Catwoman because she believes the Cat to be a demon. She is repeatedly stabbed in the torso and bound, legs apart. In short, the women are

repeatedly drawn as passive objects of obsession, not threats of strength. The depictions of these attacks far outnumber their moments of triumph, with the result that the overall tone for the characters' forms and posture is that of victimization. The cycle continues with brief success and unity in the form of mere survival followed by punishing domination and defeat.

In fact, within the entire series, the girls are only able to successfully defeat subpar villains, such as Boneblaster, a new and inexperienced street thug out to make a name for himself. Catwoman is almost defeated by him and must be rescued by Ivy. When the girls face challenges on their own, there is dubious agency in their ability to survive the ordeal. Even in moments of great power, the Sirens are controlled. In "Strange Fruit" Ivy reaches the height of her power but is only a puppet for an extra-terrestrial botanical deity. When Harley wields her mallet, it is only because the Joker has instructed her/manipulated her to do so. In both cases the women turn their power immediately against the other women. Catwoman never gets to show her strength as she is constantly side-lined by injury or scrambling to save her partners. Regardless of the conflict, the Sirens never seem to land on their feet, much less gain new ground. As soon as they carve out a home, they turn on each other and their home is symbolically destroyed. Doom is always literally on their doorstep. The Sirens share a hideout, a home, their veritable utopia. However, male villains destroy this space three times over the series. This is indicative of the women's inability to establish a female-centered environment in which they can be safe, happy, and healthy. While Batman has his Bat

Cave, and Superman his Fortress of Solitude, the women are constantly threatened and are given no safe harbor.

If the apparatus of impending doom is a necessary construct in the depiction of these heroines/villainesses, what message is being conveyed to women readers? A majority of the series covers depict the women broken, bleeding, with the iconography of their power flaccid and useless. In these issues the Sirens are alternately victimized by males and rescued by males. If a heroine's/villainess's security is dependent on male protection, a male reader may have his bad girl, who often serves as an ally, and know she must rely on him to avoid impending doom.

In the final issue, it is revealed that Catwoman pretended to betray the other two so as to protect them from Batman. It is unclear what power Batman could exert over the women (especially when united) but what remains unsaid shows the canonized implication that one man of dubious strength is naturally able to defeat three powerful women, one of whom has actual super powers. The women are clearly unable to survive, much less thrive in Gotham without a male character's blessing. The women depart each others' company symbolically carrying a symbol of the others' power: vines, whip, and mallet. Perhaps the women are presumed to have strengthened each other in their short union, but that is not likely the case.

Catwoman was invented between the first and second wave of feminism. Poison Ivy was created in line with the second wave's conflict over sexuality with the third wave. Her character, sexually dominant and often clad in nothing but leaves represents a

powerful aggressive female typical in Bad Girl Art. Harley Quinn represents a perceived post-patriarchy mentality when her stereotypical battered girlfriend character somehow escaped political fervor. Despite their diverse origins, once they are united in *Gotham City Sirens*, they are eventually restrained and beaten into submission by male villains, sidekicks, and eventually, Batman. Only very recently have female characters begun to emerge as well-rounded, dynamic representations of our gender rather than docile helpmates who always allow the man to save the day. One all female team, The Birds of Prey, has even been allowed to flourish almost to the degree of self-sufficiency for several years.

Gotham City Sirens was written and edited by an all male team. These male creative scripted the women as victims from the start. The strength women found in working together despite differences during feminism's third wave, is absent in this series. The reason for their lack of agency is unexplained and unclear. Their victimization goes beyond the basic tropes. With the DC reboot of 52 titles, Catwoman's and Batwoman's series were rumored to include women creatives. Despite the state of these characters prior to the relaunch, the inclusion of females in the collaboration raised optimism among fans of the women of Gotham.

## Retro Controversy in the New 52

With the launch of the New 52 in 2011,<sup>43</sup> Batwoman and Catwoman were both given their own, rebooted storylines while keeping their current back stories intact. Gail Simone was assigned to reboot Batgirl, artist Amy Reeder was assigned to draw Batwoman, and a team of women were assigned to write, draw, and edit Catwoman. With such talented females tackling some of the strongest heroines of the Gotham pantheon, hope was high for the future of these women.

The relaunch was not without its controversy and once again, the depiction of women stood at the forefront. FOX News launched an attack on the new series claiming that Catwoman's book was too sexualized and violent. FOX News Edge produced an hour long special report that focused on Catwoman's first issue in November 2011 and the first issue of *Red Hood and the Outlaws*, in which the voluptuous Starfire appears in a tiny bikini and has casual sex. The report included the testimony of Neil Bernstein, author of *How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble*, who claimed the plots of sex, violence, and homosexuality were targeting children and encouraging aggressive behavior. Local FOX affiliates ran similar stories in most major cities, renewing the outrage that defined Wertham's publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>44</sup> Again, these commentators barely

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<sup>43</sup> In 2011 DC decided to start 52 of its most popular titles back to Issue #1 as a strategy to call back lapsed readers and reboot aged characters.

<sup>44</sup> Ironically, all of these stories, including the initial FOX News Edge report have disappeared with the exception of the story in Charlotte, NC which can be found here: <http://www.foxcharlotte.com/news/local/Edgy-New-Comic-Books-Leave-People-Flooding-Local-Stores-131958873.html>

remark on the violence in the books; instead, they focus on the costumes and sexualization of characters, particularly those who are not fulfilling domestic gender roles. It is important to note here that the reports focused only on women who appear to be having casual sex outside the parameters of normalized society.<sup>45</sup> In the first issue of *Superman*, Clark Kent shows up at Lois Lane's door with flowers to apologize to her only to discover her in a robe with her new half-naked new beau (Perez and Merino 14). This scenario was never mentioned because her relationship is not seen as deviant in the way casual sex or sex across the boundaries of good/evil might be interpreted.

Despite the fervor over Catwoman's sexual dalliances, Batwoman evaded the controversy. Her back story was rewritten to depict her expulsion from West Point as an infraction of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (Williams 2). Technology and social media have allowed the cataloging, debating, and contextualizing of tropes in the treatment of females of DC Comics. Startling trends emerged such as the frequency of violent deaths and rapes of female DC characters, as well as the publication of DC's shockingly low percentage of female employees. The industry did not respond with more than tokenism to these complaints.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> A number of female comic writers and columnist have expressed outrage at these depictions of Catwoman and Starfire, claiming that these are not sexually liberated women but women posed and drawn for pleasure of the male gaze (Hudson).

<sup>46</sup> With the relaunch of most major superhero titles, there was promise in several all female titles and the hiring of Gail Simone to write *Batgirl* and Amy Reeder to draw *Batwoman*.

### **Catwoman Reincarnated**

Catwoman's first issue ends with her straddling Batman in a sexual moment that goes beyond insinuation, the image that caused an outcry from parent groups. Her storyline began in weakness; the preview issue depicts her being beaten, punched, and stripped while she remains passive, hardly a strong start for a strong-willed, popular character. What is exceptional is that this issue shows a scene of a man catching her stealing, dragging her into an alley, and beating her up. She never fights back and this scene is shown not once, but twice in the short 20 page story (Nocenti 4,12). In this reappropriation of Catwoman's genesis, Catwoman struggles to find a brother working as a secretary—a position she received from a man through a second chance program. Her rescuer returns when she triggers a security breach by looking at her file. He then throws her off a roof. She remarks, "Being shoved off a roof to plunge to my death—surprising but not unexpected. Why scream?" (Nocenti and Melo 15). The text is complimentary to the graphics which are devoid of surprise or ominous foreshadowing; without any prelude she is shoved unceremoniously off the roof. Her genesis is shorthanded with the common iconography of her being surrounded by stray cats and sewing a mask. She then steals the hard drive that contains her file only to find it wiped clean. So in twenty pages the heroine is beaten twice, thrown off a roof, and never shows a moment of strength, wit, or agency. What makes this preview issue so contentious is that unlike the first issue, created by Judd Winick and Guillem March, this issue was written, penciled, and edited by women (Ann Nocenti, Adriana Melo, and Rachel Gluckstern, respectfully). Several

interesting choices were made in this adaptation of her origin story. She is beaten personally by a man, rescued by another man, must enlist the help of a male computer tech to search for her file, and she hires another male computer tech to search the stolen hard drive. At the epiphanic moment where she assumes the identity of Catwoman, there is no strength, no certainty, and no claiming of identity. Her words read hollowly with lack of identity as Selina Kyle and her need to know who she is. In the final panel of the book, the computer tech states, “I’m sorry but I think you’re mistaken. This Selina Kyle...She doesn’t exist” (Nocenti and Melo 20). Her origin is marked by lack and not the realization of an identity as is common for most male superheroes.

But how does this origin differ from previous incarnations? In all other origins, Selina is an orphan in foster and group homes until she comes of age.<sup>47</sup> In most storylines she has a sister Maggie who she fights to protect from abuse. Occasionally Maggie is interchanged with Holly, a young girl who is a recurring figure throughout Catwoman’s titles. In many installments Selina works as a dominatrix or prostitute under a pimp named Stan. Selina stands out from the other street children because she stands up to those who abuse them, and takes revenge on those who harm children in need. More specifically, the donning of her cat mask is often her claiming her identity to seek justice. In denying her this moment of identity and success, and ending her transformation in lack and weakness, the new team of writers set Selina up for failure.

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<sup>47</sup> She is often written to be the abandoned daughter of a drunk. In one storyline she is revealed to potentially be the illegitimate daughter of Carmine Falcone (Loeb and Sale 14).

In an odd twist, the reboot team was all male with the exception of Gluckstern who stayed on as editor. While Catwoman is drawn with confident posture and strong muscles- a marked difference from the wide-eyed pony-tailed version in the preview- she is not shown as a whole person until page 4. The first page, first two panels are a close up of her breasts in a red lacy bra (Winick and March 1). Her head is cut off above the lips. The third panel pulls back to show her buttocks as well. On the second page, the top panel shows her lips, the bottom panel focused on her buttocks, cut off at the waist and ankle. On the fourth page- also the title page- she is fully shown, partially clad, fleeing from her apartment right before it explodes. There are several interesting elements at play. The introductory close-ups do not focus on the iconography of her character, her whip or goggles, but instead on helpless kittens, red bras, and a latex-clad derriere. The focus is obviously her secondary sex characteristics with a focus on her vulnerability, shown in her rescuing of kittens which she calls “babies” instead of full grown cats, as well as the exposure of only her breasts and throat. Also, the two close-ups on her lips are an interesting choice given she has no dialogue, only internal monologue as she mentally catalogues the items she should take when fleeing. The focus is not on her strong legs, arms or facial expression but on the passive components of her gender which are useless in this particular scenario, when someone is coming to kill her. Are these components beautiful in their passivity and vulnerability?

In the January 2013 issue, “To Skin a Cat,” Catwoman's body plays a significant role in her ability to navigate Gotham and withstand more fetishized abuse and torture.

The Joker sets a series of traps, which are in fact a series of tests to determine Catwoman's agency and her reliance on Batman.<sup>48</sup> Each test specifically addresses the previous complaints brought against her and her agency as an “active phallic” force is ineffective and she remains largely passive throughout the narrative. During her first confrontation with the Joker, it looks as though Catwoman may break from the Beauvoirian cycle of rescuer/rescued. Having been kissed with a paralyzing potion, Catwoman is left without agency of her own body. She lies passively tied up while the Joker launches into a speech about her dependence on Batman, her devotion to him, and how it holds her back. His motivation is unclear as he states,

Where's your savior? No big Batman to the rescue? I've seen him save you. You fall, he catches you. Yawn. Poor Cinderella, waiting for a big fat pumpkin that never comes and a glass slipper way too small to fit your big feet. Poor Sleeping Beauty always dead until kissed awake. You fall again, he catches you again. Ho-Hum. Oh yes, and once upon a time you were a helpless doll stuck in a dollhouse. Ta-da! Batman and his Batmobile to the rescue [...] You need a man to come to your rescue. You're weak (Nocenti #14 12).

While his focus on this fetishization may be displaced because she is Batman's plaything, and Batman is usually the focus of the Joker's attacks, what is clear is that his victimization of Catwoman has nothing to do with *her*, just as the fetishization and

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<sup>48</sup> The entirety of the issue is deeply disturbing as the Joker uses more and more elaborate forms to torture to strip Catwoman of her costume and dignity. She remains naked for the better part of the storyline and there are only three pages that do not show her passive or incapacitated (Nocenti #14).

appropriation of female characters has nothing to do with *them*, but their readers and consumers.

After his speech, the Joker stamps her with a kiss that contains the antidote for the paralysis. Catwoman is only alive because the Joker has allowed her to be so and he denied her the resolution of rescuing herself after the victimization. When she returns home, she discovers the Joker rigged her catsuit to cover her body in Batman decals when she removes it. Her discovery of the decals is drawn so that she peels off the suit to reveal a typical lacy bra and thong and is angled so that her breasts and buttocks are both on display. Though she is wriggling out of a catsuit, her legs are splayed and her shoulders hunched up around her neck. Her red lips are parted in apparent surprise and her eyes are surprisingly passive and still. She is posed in an unconfident, vulnerable nature, covered in masculine iconography, and still bearing the ink of Joker's kiss on her cheek. More subtle is the jutting skyscraper of Wayne Tower, visible in her window, and angled threateningly toward her face. With the collaboration of Nocenti and Gluckstern—both females—Rafa Sandoval composed the scene to show Catwoman's weakness, her falling into the passivity the Joker wanted to see from her. She rushes to the shower to rid herself of the Bat's iconography but misses a spot on her shoulder. As she seeks out a solution, she is obviously unnerved, snapping at a woman who points out the bat on her shoulder, a parallel to the Joker pointing out Batman's impression upon her and her reliance upon him. The last lines of the issue label the Catwoman as "unworthy" and "unreliable". Her last words to herself are admitting she may have to save Batman if he is in danger

because, "I need him." (Nocenti #14 20).

It is very easy to see potential here for what Bordo describes as a discourse that allows, "us to confront mechanisms by which the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression" (167). That is to say, since Catwoman functions within a male realm, she constantly comes up against forces that keep her docile, literally paralyzed, and without agency. In these confrontations she never succeeds. The message here is unsubtle. Without Batman, she is at the mercy of any man, including the Joker. She has no ability to help, rescue, or support herself. In her chapter, "Contexts for the Meaning of Third Wave Feminism," Ednie Kaeh Garrison outlines the socially constructed moral debate of what constitutes feminism in a mass media market that is decidedly male (186-187). Quoting McDermott, she references the "naturalized and overdetermined [aspects of] American culture" that are so normalized for the mass majority of media consumers that "we do not recognize them as socially constructed moralistic contests for cultural or political authority" (Garrison 187). She explains that there is an underlying idealistic belief that society must be working in our favor although the reality is far from the ideal (Garrison 187). Applied to narrative structure, we look for the happy ending, assuming that things will work out in Catwoman's favor. And they do, but she almost never survives by her own agency. Despite Catwoman's continued popularity as a character, and a team of female writers, artists, and editor, she remains largely similar to her character in 1940—still reliant on Batman for rescue. If anything, she has even less ability, as she is readily and passively dispatched by the Joker. The

Catwoman of the Golden Age was rarely passive, even if it meant driving a tractor to her death. In 2013, she is still unable to thrive within the masculine fictional realm of Gotham, or the masculine comic construct.

### **The Othering of Batwoman**

With each surge in civil rights awareness, comic creators have sought to meet societal standards by altering characters to represent oppressed minorities in a positive context. In the wake of the AIDS epidemic of 1992, Marvel outed North Star, a French-Canadian superhero and X-Man. His outing was subtle and originally intended as an introduction to an HIV/AIDS story line, however it was decided that the disease he is struck with would remain unnamed. This was namely because another HIV positive superheroine, Jet, was unpopular with readers and was quickly killed off within the storyline.<sup>49</sup> Although Batwoman was originally introduced as a vehicle for heteronormative matrimony, she was selected in 2006 to be reinvented as a lesbian. By this point, the fervor surrounding homosexuality had settled to a dull roar. The announcement went largely unnoticed and the previously vocal conservative groups stayed quiet.<sup>50</sup> In 2011 with the relaunch of 52 DC lines, Batwoman was given her own

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<sup>49</sup> Jet, a black female was the first character with HIV which she contracted from a monstrous creature (Englehart, et. al). Here both her race, gender, and biology is aligned with the grotesque. Another important note that the only other HIV character in a mainstream comic was Jim Wilson, a black character from the Incredible Hulk (David). Singer notes that an ominous blood test taken from Black Lightning that would “ruin his reputation” is remarkably similar in rhetoric to an AIDS test (115).

<sup>50</sup> In 2012, the outing of Green Lantern sparked protests and outrage from organizations such as One Million Moms and the American Family Association (Flood).

series. Her back story was rewritten to depict her expulsion from West Point as an infraction of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (Williams 2). The character was beautifully drawn and the nominee for an Eisner award.<sup>51</sup> Batwoman is depicted in great strength. Unlike her previous incarnations, she is almost never passive or in need of rescue. Many aspects of the narrative were positive, most of the main characters were women, and male staples to Gotham such as Commissioner Gordon and Batman were given only tertiary roles and no agency. Batwoman, Maggie Sawyer (a police detective, and Batwoman's love interest), and DEO Agent Cameron Chase are all strong women with true agency within the story.

However, underlying images and iconography betray an alliance with the grotesque. Batwoman, out of uniform as Kate Kane was labeled Jewish and given a temper, as well as a violent sense of vigilantism. With the character's reboot in 2011, her battles crossed over into the realm of the supernatural and grotesque and her appearance was radically altered to mimic a vampiric character, complete with nocturnal tendencies. With her new ghoulish countenance, Batwoman is not faithfully maintaining a superhero storyline despite her homosexuality, she is becoming a grotesque caricature of Other. The grotesque is often narrative method by which "man's troublous inner life" is manifest in physical deformity or disturbing action (Clark 7). Often affiliated with gothic literature

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<sup>51</sup> On the production the series started with no women creatives and Amy Reeder did not appear until issue 6, quitting after issue 8 (Khouri). Once Reeder began the "To Drown the World" story arc, the series became fraught with issues. While the character was beautifully, the fluctuation between Reeder and Williams was drastic, even distracting.

and containing allusions to death, ghosts, demons, or the supernatural, the grotesque is “well suited to exaggerate the dark side of human nature, to shock the audience with scenes of the startling, the disturbing, the unnatural, and the absurd” (Clark 7). By altering Batwoman’s external appearance to take on that of a gothic aesthetic, her internal workings are identified as conflicted and troubled. Her transition of sexuality is not a positive step forward presented in the marketing of her character but rather a step into the grotesque and undesirable.

The motivation behind Silver Age Batwoman’s heteronormative genesis has been previously discussed. But one must examine the motivation behind her rebooted character. Batwoman was such an unpopular character that her replacement by Batgirl went largely unnoticed. Nearly a decade after Marvel had revamped a number of unpopular characters as homosexual, DC decided to revive Batwoman the same way. The motivation behind this choice is unclear, although common belief at the time was that it was a late-in-the-game attempt to boost readership with new modern diversification of characters. In her initial reincarnation, Kate Kane looks like any other heroine. She has long, flowing red locks and ferocious curves (Johns et. al). With her reboot, she is drawn with a pasty white complexion and more masculine features including a reduced bust and short hair. The addition of black-rimmed eyes contributes to a ghoulish demeanor. This depiction aligns with her first big case, a ghost who kills children and leaves piles of werewolf corpses in its wake. This does not sound like a typical Gotham narrative. Typical narratives stray into the absurd and grotesque but rarely into the supernatural.

Moving her agency and control out of the daylight and into the supernatural, freak-filled underworld sets her apart not only from her romantic partners, but from other heroines as well.

Moreover, Batwoman constantly battles with grotesque representations of femaleness or femininity. In one storyline, she kills off chimera freaks created and ruled by her undead mother. Her mother calls these creations her children, and Batwoman—another of her grotesque offspring—is forced to destroy her maternal figure. Batwoman also battles Medusa and the crazed ghost of her former heteronormative self, Kathy Kane. Although these incarnations of femininity are equally coded as grotesque, the symbolism in Batwoman's need to defeat them is clear. She is clearly coded as fighting against femaleness. This further codes the embodiment of the female, especially the homosexual female, as grotesque in a manner reminiscent of Wertham's initial claims against the female body in *Seduction of the Innocent*. The history behind the gothic grotesque is based in the sense that at any moment, an underlying barbarism may destroy the careful constructs of society (Clark 17). By their nature, comic books play with this latent fear but depict superheroes saving society at the last minute. So why would Batwoman, a fighter of injustice, be depicted in the style of gothic grotesque? Perhaps Batwoman is being marketed as the underlying threat to heteronormative society.

More disturbing evidence of Batwoman grotesque alignment is the specific parallel of Batwoman's first sexual encounter within Maggie Sawyer and the maiming of her heterosexual counterpart, Bette. When Batwoman denies her company on a patrol,

Bette attempts to fight one of the grotesque “children” of Batwoman’s mother, an ogre with a sickle for a hand. The ogre’s banter is highly sexualized, a play to the interwoven cells of Bette’s combat and Batwoman’s sex scene. Batwoman’s sexual engagement is drawn in light pencil with minimal detail while Bette’s scenes are drawn in the stylized action of the rest of the book. This differentiation aligns the sex scene with the symbolic, and the fight scene with the more realistic plot. The crippling blow, the penetration of a hook to Bette’s abdomen, comes at the moment of Batwoman’s orgasm. Batwoman’s pleasure is truly aligned with the transgressive for two reasons. Her moment of pleasure marks the defeat of her heteronormative ally, and the joining of two lesbian characters marks a win for the grotesque.

Batwoman’s homosexuality transgresses against the heteronormative comic structure, but changes in her religion and race introduce moral or religious transgressions as well. According to Eve Sedgwick, “Even today, Jewish little girls are educated in gender roles- fondness of being looked at, fearlessness in defense of ‘their people,’ nonsolidarity with their sex” (Sedgwick 82). In other words, Jewish women are taught to defend their kin, play the female role while not fraternizing with other females, and cultivate aesthetic perfection. Batwoman is none of these things, choosing to hide under the cover of night, fight against her grotesque family or “people,” and trusting only the company of women. Her Jewishness is not remotely significant in her narrative, and it is introduced haphazardly as if it were an afterthought. The only reason for her conversion is to show her transgressive nature on a moral or religious ground. As a lesbian, she

would be marginalized within the Jewish community. As a lesbian, she is marginalized in the Gotham pantheon. She is made a doubled Other, and drawn in a grotesque manner to depict her homosexuality as grotesque and Other.

Of course the cultural alignment of the monstrous or grotesque with evil is nothing new. This theory is supported by examining the binaries of beauty/nonbeauty and moral/immoral: “beauty and nonbeauty can serve as a basis for political rhetoric. The moral credentials of a group- an ethnicity or a race- can be endorsed by means of an association with beauty, or it can be demeaned by being representative of an opposing faction as an ogre is to call into question the moral worth of that faction” (Carroll 38). If the vast majority of homosexual characters are depicted as ogres, it stands to reason that the reader will align homosexuality with immorality and the grotesque. DC has a long history of making its homosexual, bisexual, or asexual characters physically Other. They have scales, monstrous shapes, blue skin, or alien-like features. Many appear as “ogres,” hulking, monstrous beasts instead of humanoid forms.<sup>52</sup> In fact, North Star, Green Lantern, and Batwoman appear to be the only white, homosexual characters in the main titles, though North Star appears decidedly Asian and Batwoman is announced as Jewish when their characters come out as gay. Recently, Green Lantern Alan Scott was rewritten as homosexual, and his race, religion, and even previous back story remained relatively the same. He and his boyfriend are coded normal, as are all aspects of their lifestyle,

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<sup>52</sup> Other ogre-like characters include Graymalkin, Anole, Ice Maiden, Korg, and Bling.

though they are both white. In April 2013 Gail Simone<sup>53</sup> introduced Alysia, the first transgender, non-monstrous character in DC.<sup>54</sup> Although she is not a superhero, perhaps this bodes well for the future of non-heteronormative characters.

This raises another point: the intersectionality of race and sexuality. Every homosexual couple in comics has featured one non-white character.<sup>55</sup> Renee Montoya, Batwoman's first love interest was Hispanic, North Star's husband is black; and the first two romantic kisses between characters of the same sex involved men who were blue and pink. Apart from the supernatural affiliations, Batwoman's white face and Jewishness align her with another minority category. The motivation of this reassignment of race/religion, coupled with the addition of physically grotesque features seems suspicious. If the intention was to code a homosexual character as normal, wouldn't that character remain otherwise the same? According to Dr. M. Thomas Inge, author of *Comics as Culture* and *Comics as History*, "Other forms of media have been more progressive with gay characters. ... We have seen gay characters in [newspaper] comic strips such as 'For Better or Worse' and 'Doonesbury.' But comic books have lagged behind "(B. Robinson). The problematic positioning of homosexual characters as

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<sup>53</sup> As previously mentioned, Gail Simone has been a progressive force in comics. She was recently fired from the Batgirl series (in which the transgendered character appears) but after a rush of public fervor was reinstated. (Esposito).

<sup>54</sup> Batgirl #19. Simone's work on the Batgirl series has been revolutionary in overturning the treatment discussed in this paper.

<sup>55</sup> Again, except the new Green Lantern.

multiplied Others conveys a refusal to draw these characters as dynamic, realistic, multi-dimensional individuals.

Even Batwoman's lovers Maggie Sawyer and Renee Montoya appear as masculine, reinscribing the same gendered binaries that mark women as monstrous. Both Sawyer and Montoya are police detectives, which places them on the side of good/right while Batwoman, who operates outside the law, is depicted as bad/wrong. This is clear from her interactions with both of them and their admonishment of how she handles cases. Along these lines, both Sawyer and Montoya operate within judicial buildings and uphold the ideals of a civilized society, aligning them with civilization. Batwoman often lurks in bushes, hides in trees, or examines crime scenes in forested parks and is symbolically aligned with nature. Most importantly, Batwoman fights the supernatural masked, under the cover of night. This binary is enforced as Batwoman's interests are constantly pitted against those of Gotham's Police Department. Batman functions in the daylight and public eye as Bruce Wayne. He is able to maintain his millionaire playboy status while enacting justice at night. Batwoman functions within the pages of her book only as Batwoman. Although she, like Bruce, is a millionaire heiress, when she is shown as Kate Kane, it is to show her deficiency in the public sphere: she dates clumsily, dresses like a clubber, and continually loses her temper.

To summarize, Batwoman is aligned with bad, wrong, darkness, ghouls, monsters, nature, nonbeauty, and wildness- a truly gendered lesbian character while her counterparts are aligned with good, right, light, public, legality, and civilization. The

othering of her character is evidence of an unsettled tension regarding homosexual characters within popular comics. As feminism is focusing on the different needs of women based on gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and many other aspects of oppression, the marginalization of women in DC Comics indicates the industries refusal to reflect non-normative women in a positive manner.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Batwoman's strength, as well as Catwoman's continued passivity have continued to drive discussion to action and drummed up new debate in the realm of gendered comics. The tension regarding strong women, women outside the heteronormative structure, and "transgressive" women in comic books, and the refusal of the industry to accept criticism regarding its policies toward gender raise cause for concern regarding the future of these heroines. The implications of such canonical institutionalism, with regards to the roles of women, have the power to do much harm in a genre that is gaining in female readership. Despite recent (and frankly, inadequate) alterations, the overall treatment of powerful women within comics promotes the continued oppression of women as second-class heroes who do not deserve dynamic and self-sufficient roles within popular culture.

Where we must engage in critical analysis and frank discussion is when the power and agency of the women does not shift, develop, or progress with changing gender politics. Catwoman is still the coy temptress with a heart of gold. Over time her character

has become weaker and the focus of fetishized torture. Batwoman is in a state of constant flux, lacking in consistent character as a victim of commoditization in alliance with changing social norms. This is evidenced in her roles as a moral savior, a disempowered matriarch, a lipstick lesbian, and a ghost-fighting Jewess. Neither character can be allowed to succeed because that would change and break the phallo-centric archetypes they have become. To alter their character to the point of self-sufficiency would disqualify their forms from the psycho-sexual fulfillment that was drawn into their destiny and inscribed upon their bodies by the male gaze.

The actualization of gender is a ritual that is repeated (Butler 474). The female victim is a ritual repeated to actualize male-ness and the desperate need to see women as passive, submissive, diminutive. If comics fulfill a need for adventure that individuals do not experience in their lives, then what damage is done when female characters succeed only through male rescue or experience repeated punishment and torture? The narrative possibilities, philosophical implications, and phenomenological treatises are endless so there are alternatives. Imagine Catwoman rescuing Batman quid pro quo, or a series in which females consistently thrive. There are promises in "Birds of Prey," a new all female X-Men line, and other upcoming publications. However, today's female reader cannot help but wait for the other shoe to drop, for her heroines and villainesses to fail because we know, unlike Batman or Superman, who despite occasional defeat always end up on top, we know these women will eventually fail.



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