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CRITICISM

Black Orchid Reborn: Neil Gaiman's Feminist Superhero

MARY HANCOCK

By the ancient city gate sat an old coffee-brown, black-veiled woman who made her living by telling stories.

—Isak Dinesen, “The Blank Page”

In Isak Dinesen’s “The Blank Page,” an old woman relates a tale about an ancient convent high in the hills of Portugal. The convent houses a gallery of framed sheets hung side by side. These sheets, stained with the blood of the women in Portugal’s royal family, are meant to stand as a testament that each woman’s virginity was in tact on her wedding night. People went to the gallery to look at the sheets, and from the blood, they would draw omens and make predictions about the women whose names adorned the gilded frames. Women and handmaidens to the royal family made pilgrimages to gaze upon the sheets belonging to the royalty they once served, and to remember the female life each frame represented. There was one frame, however, that captured the attention of every woman regardless of whose frame she came to see. One frame that is “as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with the royal crown. But on this plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page” (Dinesen, 1957, p.104).

The old woman claims that this blank canvas draws the most contemplation, causing women visitors to sink “deepest into thought” (p. 105). But why? While the sheets are stained with the blood of women and bear women’s names, they actually showcase the stories of men, their conquests of virgins, and their taking of a bride. The blank white sheet, however, holds no such connotations. In light of anthropological theories of society, specifically the kinship structures posited by social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the blood-stained sheets reveal masculine, not feminine stories. According to Strauss, patriarchal societies such as those in Portugal have long been based on this idea of gift exchange which occurs strictly between men and, in the instance of

marriage, posits woman as the gift given by the father of the bride to the groom. The blood on the sheet, then, never belonged to her, so it did not tell her story.

The old woman in the tale further remarks: “When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all—where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier and more cruel tale than that?” (Dinesen, 1957, p. 100). The pen, a phallic metaphor, has written down its tale, and the blood, a yonic metaphor, is the ink used to communicate this tale to other men. The old woman’s story tells us that men may use women to tell their stories, but women have no means of replying, except through the blank canvas, which in its silence and emptiness seems to comply to masculine designs.

Like the portrait gallery in Dinesen’s story, comics are lined with hundreds of millions of frames inked by men, and the great majority of them relate masculine conquests—conquests achieved chiefly through misrepresentations of women. Patriarchal depictions exist in other areas of popular culture but are arguably more conspicuous in comics, which unlike other media have remained largely unchecked. While watchdog groups such as the MPAA, RIAA, and ESRB monitor the content of film, television, and video games for sexual depictions and violence against women, most comic publishers have abandoned the Comics Code Authority, a self-imposed set of ethical standards created by the comics industry in 1954. Arguably, this deregulation has allowed predominantly male creators to exploit and degrade their female characters without fear of social or professional repercussion.

In his *Women in Comics* series, author Maurice Horn (2001) notes that historically, comics have been read by males who are gratified by the subjugation of women. Comic artists control how female characters speak and frame, quite literally, female bodies on the page. More progressive authors and artists, however, have crafted stories that encourage a broader and significantly more modern depiction of women.

One example is the 1988 reboot of a failed DC Comics superheroine, Black Orchid. When author Neil Gaiman found the forgotten 1970s heroine, she was relegated to the background of other comics, filling conventionally female roles such as the maid or the secretary. To bring her back from the brink, Gaiman had to stretch the frames that contained her. He did so by employing text in a way that posited new possibilities for women, and his approach suggests the possibility of a new feminine identity in the universe of superhero comics.

Black Orchid Reborn: A New Feminist Identity for a Forgotten Hero

In her 1976 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the prominent French feminist Hélène Cixous, championed the idea of women reclaiming power through their writing. Cixous warned against adopting masculine practices in this struggle, arguing that “women’s liberation must be accompanied by the institution of a new socio-symbolic frame.” Cixous called for *écriture féminine* (women’s writing) as this new framing device, arguing that “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (as cited in Richter, 2007, p. 1646). Cixous and other second-wave feminists gave new importance to the writing of women such as Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Kate Chopin.

Comics, however, have lagged behind, and superhero comics have been the most archaic in their stereotypical representations of women. One exception is Gaiman’s 1988 *Black Orchid*, which appeared near the end of second-wave feminism. *Black Orchid* is significant to women’s storytelling in that it uses first-person narration, a device never before used with a female character in comics (Cantrell, 2012). Gaiman, an admirer of comics author Alan Moore, whose *Swamp Thing* pioneered the use of first-person narration, had taken an important step toward *écriture féminine*, despite his gender.

One might argue that Gaiman, a man, cannot engage in *écriture féminine*, but Cixous did not wholly exclude men from the endeavor, suggesting that if a man could identify with his feminine side, women might recognize his writing as for them. This speaks of a coexistence between the two sexes, not an opposition, an idea Cixous describes as “bisexual” writing (as cited in Richter, pp. 1644-1649). Gaiman’s writing, arguably, seeks to combine, not separate traditional male and female gender roles.

Moreover, though Cixous does not clearly define what makes writing “feminine,” she does describe male writing as either obscuring women or reproducing “the classic representations of women (as sensitive—intuitive—dreamy, etc.)” (p. 1646). Gaiman does not write Orchid as a conventional character in any sense, especially not as one who accepts traditional roles offered to her by men, making Gaiman’s writing, not wholly “feminine” or “male,” but bisexual as it includes a little of both sexes.

This is particularly evident when his *Black Orchid* is compared to the original 1973 series. In these issues, *Black Orchid* was introduced by a derisive male narrator who does not seem to take her seriously as a superhero. In the pilot issue, he announces:

No one knows who she is, or from whence she acquired her extraordinary powers . . . She has the strength of a regiment, flies through the air like a bird of prey . . . and has the beauty and compassion of a young girl! (Mayer, 1973, 429.1.1)

Despite her powers, despite her strength, *Black Orchid* was, to her original audience, a girl. She possessed many of the same powers as her male counterparts—flight, superhuman strength, and invulnerability to bullets—but her powers were subordinate to her femininity. When *Black Orchid* was depicted flying or lifting a car over her head, there were no awe-stricken exclamations of “It’s a bird! It’s a plane!” Instead, witnesses were shown as incredulous: “It’s a chick! She’s flying!” or “That crazy broad is as strong as an ox!” (Mayer, 1973, 429. 5.3). Such dismissive responses to her heroic deeds may have translated to lackluster responses from readers: within three issues, *Black Orchid* was cancelled.

The failure of a comic with a female lead could also be attributed to the simple fact that comics “are traditionally masculine, featuring male (even hypermasculine) characters” and female superheroes very often cannot hold their own against “the masculine history of the genre . . .” (Cantrell, 2012, p. 105). While it’s true *Black Orchid*’s “girlish beauty and compassion” could not compete with the masculinity of other superheroes, there are other factors that may have attributed to its premature cancellation.

In his essay on genre theory, Peter Coogan, director of the Institute for Comics Studies and cofounder of the Comics Art Conference, may offer one explanation. He defines a superhero as a heroic character who displays “extraordinary powers, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a code name and iconic costume, which typically

express his biography, character, powers, or *origin* [emphasis mine]" (Coogan, 2012, p. 205). Though the first issue of *Black Orchid* claimed to contain her origin story, it did not reveal how she came into her power or disclose why she fights crime. Without this critical backstory, Black Orchid could be defined only by her skin-tight purple bodysuit and her shallow banter with other characters, nearly all of them male. More damaging still, Black Orchid frequently disguised herself as an ordinary secretary or maid in order to infiltrate evil organizations and gain information.

In sum, Black Orchid was not a superhero because she lacked an origin story, but neither was she a simple secretary or a maid. Who was she, then? This is precisely the question Gaiman's *Black Orchid* sought to answer over fifteen years later.

The opening pages of Gaiman's first issue suggest that not much has changed for the heroine: Black Orchid is working undercover as a secretary at one of Lex Luthor's evil enterprises. While her disguise seems in keeping with the original comic, Gaiman soon alters the conventional "Black Orchid" plotline: her secret identity is discovered, and she is immediately killed. Her death results in the mysterious emergence of another Black Orchid-like figure in a greenhouse across town. With purple skin and flower-petal hair, this new version of Black Orchid looks more like a plant than a woman. When she awakens, she seems aware of her previous incarnation but is still confused about her identity. Her first words ask a critical question: "Who am I?" (Gaiman, 1.17.6).

Attempting to answer her inquiry is Dr. Phillip Sylvian, the owner of the greenhouse and creator of multiple human-plant hybrids, including the Black Orchid killed at the outset of the issue. In Gaiman's reinvented mythology, Sylvian worked with the late Susan Linden, the original Black Orchid. When she was murdered by Carl Thorne, her ex-husband, Sylvian blended her DNA with Swamp Thing's to create new versions of Black Orchid in his greenhouse. Sylvian had been

in love with Susan Linden since they were both young, but she married Thorne. To Sylvian, Susan Linden was a "feminine mystery," a myth French feminist Simone de Beauvoir believes to be most anchored in the hearts of men because it allowed "easy explanation for anything inexplicable," such as the woman you love choosing to marry another man (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 268).

To return to the plot: when the reborn Black Orchid (hereafter "Orchid") asks who she is, Sylvian tells her Susan Linden's history, frustrating Orchid's desire to learn her own background. As his story continues, Sylvian begins substituting *you* (Orchid) for *Susan*, conflating the identities of his past

crush and his present creation. His blending of one female with another is a good example of what Beauvoir calls the myth of the "Eternal Feminine," an idealized version of womanhood that denies females their individuality. This is a problem because, as with every feminine myth devised by men, the Eternal Feminine is not a woman's story, but the story of a man's experience of that woman. This is certainly true of the tale Sylvian tells: he describes how he cared for Susan when she was teased growing up, how he provided for her when she ran away from home, and how she kissed him in the shed. He claims he's telling Susan's story, but they are his experiences of Susan told from his point of view.

It makes sense, then, that Orchid remains confused about

her identity even after Sylvian's explanation. As he finishes his narrative, she thinks to herself, "Susan Linden. Her story touches echoes in me, but I don't understand." (Gaiman, 1.32.2). Orchid could have accepted the identity Sylvian gave her (the maiden in distress), but her instincts tell her that this scenario does not add up, unless Sylvian is her caregiver. "Are you my father?" she asks, a logical query given the role Sylvian has assumed up to this point: he created Orchid, sheltered her, and provided her identity. He responds with a half-hearted, "I supposed I am . . . in a way," but Orchid tires of

Figure 1. BLACK ORCHID © 1973 by Sheldon Mayer and Tony DeZuniga. DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

his cryptic answers (Gaiman, 1.32.3). She tells him that she needs to sleep. In one last attempt to actualize his fantasy about Susan, Sylvian tells Orchid she can sleep in Susan's old room. But Orchid refuses to be confined—to the bedroom or to a preconceived identity: “No . . . I need to be outside in the open” (Gaiman, 1.34.2).

As Orchid sleeps in the tree outside, a man comes to the front door of Sylvian's home. The man, Carl Thorne, is Susan Linden's ex-husband who believes Susan had an affair with Sylvian. Thorne kills Sylvian and stumbles out to the greenhouse, where he finds Orchid and all of other hybrids that Sylvian has created. Noticing their eerie resemblance to his ex-wife, Thorne slaughters them all, except Orchid and a small hybrid named Suzy, who manage to escape. Orchid refers to Suzy as her “little sister” and takes Suzy away from the greenhouse. Later Suzy asks Orchid, “Can I call you Mommy?” and Orchid assents (Gaiman, 2.26.1). As the story progresses, Orchid and Suzy's relationship becomes nurturing, like that of a mother and daughter. Their language expresses the fluidity of their identities—they are sisters as well as mother and daughter—and suggests that Orchid's identity woes might be redressed in relationships with other women, something Cixous championed at the end of “The Laugh of the Medusa”: “In one another,” she wrote of women, “we will never be lacking” (as cited in Richter, 2007, p. 1655).

What are You Doing in My City? Taking on the Superhero Patriarchy

In addition to resisting the identity imposed on her by Sylvian, Orchid challenges the patriarchal structures that exist within the male-dominated comics industry and her own fictional world of Gotham City. As a comic, *Black Orchid* rejects conventionality its titular character dies within the first ten pages. That just does not happen in superhero comics. Traditionally, when the hero is captured by the villain, the hero always finds a way out. When Black Orchid actually succumbs to the plans of an evil man, the structure of comics has shifted.

In the introduction to the 1991 deluxe trade edition of *Black Orchid* (see Figure 2), Mikal Gilmore notes that the heroine's early death is revolutionary because it's “informing us that all the familiar rules of comic book storytelling—all those rules that insure the hard-earned triumph and inevitability of justice—will not apply in this narrative” (Introduction). This warns the audience to prepare for more changes as the story unfolds. In a 2005 interview, Gaiman said that writing *Black*

Orchid allowed him to address the things he didn't like in comics and that the dismantling of the system encouraged him to recreate something new to take its place. It was a notice to the comic book world “that the childish game of superheroes, crime, and violence [was] over, and a new, beautiful day [was] dawning” (Olson, 2005, p. 35).

In the comic itself, Black Orchid enters Gotham City, one of the most iconic locales in the DC Comics universe. She is looking for Pamela Isley, a former colleague of Sylvian and the alter ego of the villain Poison Ivy. Having hit a dead end in her search, she retreats to an alley to contemplate her next move. Suddenly, Batman interrupts her: “Who are you? What are you doing in my city?” (Gaiman, 2.30.1-2). Orchid responds that she's not sure, to which Batman accusatorily replies, “You have a name.” She tells him, “Not exactly. I know I'm not Susan. Phil said I was Black Orchid . . .” (Gaiman, 2.30.3).

Eventually, Batman tells Orchid that Isley is in Arkham Asylum, Gotham's infamous prison for the criminally insane, another iconic setting. Batman gives her a card with his insignia on it, telling her she will need it to get into Arkham. This turns out to be true when the front desk secretary at Arkham allows Orchid admittance only after seeing the card Batman gave her. This incident, then, as a comment on the fact that the symbols men create are what enables women to be accepted into structures (such as Arkham) that would otherwise be off-limits to them.

When Orchid runs into Batman later in the story, he tries to convince her that her identity lies in being a superhero: “Good luck, Black Orchid. I trust you too will become a crime-fighter. (Gaiman, 2.42.2). By calling her Black Orchid, Batman is doing what Jane Caputi (1992) claims men have been doing for centuries—claiming the power to name women (p. 425). Orchid, however, never accepts this identity, refusing to call herself Black Orchid at any point in the story.

Entering Arkham, Orchid asks after Pamela Isley and is led downstairs into what she refers to as “hell,” past all kinds of “obsessed . . . anguished . . . damned” occupants in glass cells (Gaiman, 2.35.4). At the very bottom of Arkham Asylum, Orchid finds Pamela Isley. Orchid walks in as Pamela is feeding a mouse to a nightmarish-looking plant-animal hybrid she calls her “baby.” When Orchid asks if she

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remembers Sylvian, Pamela responds in the affirmative, adding, "You're one of his hybrids, aren't you?" (Gaiman, 2.36.8). Her remark is significant: she is the first person to recognize that Orchid she is not Susan or Black Orchid, but a hybrid, something else. And while Isley doesn't know exactly who or what Orchid is, it is notable that it takes a woman to contribute to Orchid's sense of self, echoing what Cixous posited about progress coming from women writing women (*écriture féminine*).

Like Sylvian, Isley also creates hybrid life forms, though she admits that it "It's hard to get the materials down here . . . They don't let me out, so now it's mainly roaches and moss" (Gaiman, 2.37.1). The inferiority of Pamela's macabre "babies" to Sylvian's beautiful Orchid reinforces the idea that men's creations are superior to women's, a notion that actually exposes the patriarchal bias of male storytellers and "the ways that these entrenched mythic symbols and paradigms construct and maintain phallogocentric reality" (Caputi, 1992, p. 425).

Two mythic symbols are evident in this passage—Gotham City and Arkham Asylum. These settings allow Gaiman to expose the de facto rules and regulations of patriarchal society. Dominated by Batman, Gotham is an established system with its own set of rules. Within this system is Arkham Asylum, the end of the road for Gotham's villains who dare to challenge the power of the social order. The Joker, Penguin, and The Riddler have called Arkham home, and Gaiman shows all three in Arkham, telling jokes and flipping coins in the meeting room.

If Arkham houses social deviants, and Poison Ivy is imprisoned at the very bottom of the asylum, then her position suggests how dangerous she is to the structure of both Gotham and Arkham. She tells Orchid: "They're scared of me. Scared of my plants. Scared of my power." (Gaiman, 2.38.5). Notably, the male criminals are placed in common areas or in cells adjacent to those of other men. When a woman challenges the system, however, she is relegated to the deepest

parts of the structure, forbidden to access materials that would enable her to construct anything meaningful. In her current state, used and neglected by the men placed above her, Isley is completely powerless. Her captivity also serves as a warning for the new Orchid—this is what happens to powerful women, both in the fictional city of Gotham, and arguably, in the superhero genre itself.

Toward a Feminist Comics Mythology

In "Towards A Vegetable Theology," a letter Neil Gaiman sent to his editor regarding the organization of the

Black Orchid universe, he sketches a new power structure that forgoes the patriarchal binary system for a tertiary one called "The Earth Powers." The Earth Powers, according to Gaiman, consist of Gaea, the embodiment of Nature/Earth and the greatest Earth Power; Erl-Kings, brought forth by Gaea to champion for the Earth in times of trouble and foremost among the powers in regards to the life-cycle; and May-Queens, brought forth to be symbols of growth in times of darkness (Wagner, 2008). In Gaiman's mythology, the Earth Powers and plant-life cooperate to form "The Green," a source of power that connects all living things.

It is clear that Orchid and her hybrid sisters are May-Queens. Orchid emerges during a very dark time (the death of the original

Black Orchid) and is recognized by Pamela Isley as a "little May Queen" (Gaiman, 2.37.2). Isley, a fallen or "soured" May-Queen as Gaiman puts it, exemplifies what happens to women's power when it is isolated from the rest of the community and sealed where nothing green can grow. Likewise, when Suzy is kidnapped by men working for the industrialist Lex Luthor, Orchid is unable to communicate with her via the Green. Feeling disconnected, Orchid flees to the bayous of Louisiana for help from a creature Gaiman designates as an Erl-King: Swamp Thing.

Figure 2. BLACK ORCHID © 1991 by Neil Gaiman. Vertigo. All Rights Reserved.

When she arrives in the bayou, Orchid sees Swamp Thing and immediately tells him how she lost Suzy, how her sisters are dead, and how she still does not know her identity. “And I’m here and I don’t know what’s going on and I don’t know what I am and I don’t like it and, and it’s . . . not fair” (Gaiman, 3.5.2-3). Instead of responding verbally, Swamp Thing uses The Green to communicate comfort and give Orchid insight. He touches her face and Orchid is instantly back in sync with the power source. Using their mental connection, Swamp Thing shows Orchid a vision of a group of scientists—including Phil Sylvian and Susan Linden—who sought to better the world by creating people-plant hybrids. Swamp Thing also shows their deaths and the consequent failure of their experiment.

Orchid is left asking, “How does the story end? And what happens now?” Swamp Thing tells her, “That is your affair. What do you want?” (Gaiman, 3.8.1-2). This is the first time a male character has not tried to force an identity on Orchid. It is evidence of how a non-binary system of power might work; a system where power, including the power to identify yourself, was not contained but fluid. This is further evidenced when Orchid asks Swamp Thing for the opportunity to have new sisters to replace the ones that Thorne murdered. Swamp Thing obliges by reaching inside her chest and removing a handful of seeds.

Though this scene can be understood as Swamp Thing taking on the conventionally male role of providing seed to Orchid to make babies. But the father role is quickly taken up by Orchid when she symbolically plants “her seeds” in the fertile ground of Gaea or, Mother Earth. As Estelle Freedman suggested, adaptation seems to be the key to survival: Orchid and Swamp Thing switch between conventionally male and female roles, making it possible for new life to enter the world, life that would fill hers with new meaning and a new sense of hope.

At the end of the comic, Orchid and Suzy fly off into the sunset, still unsure of where they belong, and yet undeniably hopeful: “And together we soar, we climb, we ascend. Together. Into the sun” (Gaiman, 3.49.5). This parting sentiment from Orchid reflects the earlier idea that inclusion, of other women, of entertaining the possibility of new structures, will be the catalyst women needed to improve their status in comics. In this way, Gaiman’s feminist treatment of the Black Orchid saga also gives comic book readers hope for the future of the genre.

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