

“The Magic Circus of the Mind”: Alan Moore’s *Promethea* and the Transformation of Consciousness through Comics

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IN ITS EARLY ISSUES, Alan Moore’s 1995–2005 comic book series *Promethea* garnered lavish admiration from readers. Praise for the strong female and queer characters, tight writing, and innovative layouts by artist JH Williams filled the comic’s letters column, and feminist comic book artist and writer Trina Robbins gushingly called *Promethea* “what Wonder Woman should be if she hadn’t been destroyed by generations of idiots.”¹ In a move that upset many readers and caused the comic’s circulation to drop, however, Moore put his pedagogical aims first. When speaking of the series, Moore concedes that his intention was to draw readers in with a superhero conceit, then use the increasingly esoteric storyline to expose them to the concepts of Western occultism. “It seemed to make sense that we should start at the shallow end, with inflatable arm-bands, so as not to alienate the readership from the very outset (the plan was to wait about twelve issues and then alienate them),” he quips in a 2002 interview.² After the twelfth issue of the series, in which the titular heroine makes a journey into the world of Tarot cards (what Moore describes as “probably the most experimental story I have ever done”³), it was too late to turn back. Thereafter, the series abandoned any pretense of being a traditional superhero book and took its heroine

on a journey through each of the spheres of the kabbalistic Tree of Life, the Hebrew mystical system appropriated by Western occultists. By this point, *Promethea* had clearly become an outlet for exploring the key concepts of magic and occultism that Moore himself has studied.

Though readers accustomed to Moore's revisionist superhero narratives, such as *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke*, may have been turned off by the heavy esoteric content, Moore's occult adventures at the turn of the millennium were by no means a departure for the eccentric Northampton author. Rather, these explorations were a logical development in Moore's intriguing career, emerging from a period in his life in which he was collaborating on live spoken-word performances under the name "The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels."⁴ Moore often speaks of his fortieth birthday party, where he decided to forego a typical midlife crisis by "going completely mad" and brazenly declaring himself to be a magician.⁵ Moore's approach to comics and the creative process has always had an arcane aspect, however. In fact, in an early essay on "how to write comics," published after the success of *Watchmen* (1986) made him a darling of the mainstream comics industry, he describes the weaving of a comic narrative as a kind of hypnosis, with "the transitions between scenes [being] the weak points in the spell that you are attempting to cast over [the readers]."⁶ His complex narratives "cast spells" over his audience, whether he is challenging his readers to question the moralism of the superhero genre (*Watchmen*); fascist politics and media (*V for Vendetta*); notions of identity, humanity, and the natural world (*Swamp Thing*); or attitudes and values around fantasy literature, sexuality, and pornography (*Lost Girls*). *Promethea* effectively brings Moore's superhero work together with his ongoing interest in occultism, which has been previously represented in his collaborations with artist Eddie Campbell (for example, the densely researched *From Hell* (1991–8, 1999) and the kabbalistic *Snakes and Ladders* (2001), which was based on one of Moore's spoken word performances).

In *Promethea*, Moore takes the notion of the self-empowered superhuman even further than that of *Watchmen's* *ubermenschen* Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan and once again involves a deity-like superhero in a plot to end the world. Here, Moore takes this "end of the world" cliché, a constant threat in the highly dramatic world of superheroes and supervillains, and transforms it into his own idea of the postmodern apocalypse — "the world" that is destroyed is not our physical world,

but rather our illusory constructions of reality. This move situates Moore squarely in the Romantic literary tradition and particularly as an heir of William Blake, one of Moore's major influences. For Moore, as for many of the Romantics, imagination is a divine attribute and a way to participate in the ongoing creation of the universe. Like Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Moore dreams of a utopia achieved not through political revolution, but through a radical change in consciousness produced by art. The conclusion of *Promethea* stages a Romantic apocalypse of the imagination updated with a strong feminist agenda, elements of contemporary politics, and knowledge of the Western occult tradition.

In a further variation on the usual tropes of the superhero genre, where the hero's powers are often invoked through a speech act ("Shazam!" or "Flame on!" being two famous examples), in *Promethea* creative writing is used as a trigger. College student Sophie Bangs's thesis research into the recurring literary character Promethea leads her to Barbara Shelley, the widow of an artist who had drawn the demigoddess into his wife's body with his creative process. With her husband dead, however, Barbara has become disillusioned with heroism and is now able to manifest Promethea only weakly, if at all. The two women are suddenly confronted with threatening forces, and at Barbara's behest, Sophie scribbles a poem — essentially an invocatory hymn — to Promethea as a goddess of imagination. Sophie's act of creation brings Promethea into the manifest world, and Sophie's own body serves as the vessel for the demigoddess's power.⁷

Moore seems to intend *Promethea* as a creative act that, like Sophie with her poem, pulls powerful forces of spiritual transformation into the everyday world of the reader. As he told *Comic Book Artist (CBA)* in a June 2003 interview, Moore wrote the kabbalistic issues in a state of ritual meditation. In order to describe each of the states of consciousness that Promethea's alter ego Sophie Bangs would explore, Moore himself sought to achieve them and to produce art as expressions of those states — states that, perhaps, could then be triggered in the reader. "What you were seeing in the comic is not the report of the magical experience," he told *CBA*. "It *was* the magical experience."⁸ In a May 2003 interview, Moore spoke of the fascist tendencies he sees arising in the international environment after 9/11, and he suggests that his art provides readers "access to the mental tools to get them beyond this situation [. . .] attitudes, mental tools, ways of looking at things, that could actually be of use in these otherwise turbulent times. That's the plan. With *Promethea*,

it is entirely overt."⁹ Yet the tools provided are not simply the occult concepts that Moore hopes his readers will employ. Using the unique artistic advantages of the comics medium, the comic itself becomes a potential tool for creating the positive shift in consciousness portrayed in its conclusion.

If we consider the comics medium as a type of sequential art, as comics theorist Scott McCloud claims, Moore's use of comics for educational purposes has a long and rich history. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* includes renderings of medieval French and ancient Egyptian narrative art, as well as several panels from a 36-foot long pre-Columbian picture manuscript, which narrates the history of the political and military hero "8-Deer Tiger's Claw."¹⁰ Similar examples of sequential art can be found around the world, from figures inscribed on ancient Greek urns to illustrated medieval Japanese scrolls. One illustration in *Understanding Comics* reproduces a series of scenes entitled "The Tortures of Saint Erasmus," a bloody late medieval work portraying the sufferings of a Christian martyr.¹¹ Although this kind of art might be off-putting to contemporary tastes, it served the same religious purpose as the great stained glass windows of European cathedrals, with their scenes of the life of Christ and the acts of apostles and saints. Such works instructed and were thought to inspire devotion in medieval worshippers, many of whom were illiterate.

Some distinction remains in American culture between "low" art and "high" art, so the notion that a comic could effectively serve as a trigger for a spiritual state in the same way a cathedral window can, may seem counterintuitive to some. Art historian David Freedberg's *The Power of Images*, however, explores the history of response to images in Western culture and charts the persistence of viewers' intense emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical responses to both popular and fine art. If anything, Freedberg asserts, it is *more* acceptable to have strong and varied responses to popular art forms, under which he includes everything from personal religious images sold for home altars to erotic photography (comic books would certainly also fall into this category).¹² Moore seems to be counting on this mysterious power of images — and his audience's openness to being viscerally engaged by a comic book — to make the otherwise didactic *Promethea* issues successful.

Freedberg's history of image response provides a framework for how an interactive comic book reading experience might function. Published in the late 1980s, *The Power of Images* is now somewhat dated, particularly

in its assumption that eroticism in both secular and religious art serves a male gaze and does not have an arousing effect on women. The book does, however, present convincing evidence for the persistent Western belief in images' power to affect viewers psychologically and spiritually, as well as to move them to action. For example, in time periods as diverse as ancient Greece and the Renaissance, writers have advised looking at beautiful images of human beings during sexual relations and pregnancy to assure the health of children; undesirable images were felt to contribute to similar characteristics in one's offspring.¹³ Freedberg also provides ample evidence of belief that religious images channel the powers of the gods, saints, or spirits that they represent. Images of the Virgin Mary have been especially renowned for their ability to heal, and during the Renaissance, images of Christ were often held before the eyes of condemned criminals as they were led to execution in order to maximize their chances of salvation.¹⁴ More generally, Freedberg gives numerous accounts of viewers' experiences of images having life: portraits' eyes are felt to follow the viewer around the room, sculptures of deities are chained up to keep them from escaping, paintings or wax images are made of enemies or criminals and then punished by ritual hanging or dismemberment, and statues — particularly religious ones — are washed, fed with offerings, caressed, kissed, engaged sexually, and attacked by viewers.

Although Freedberg provides a model for explaining the power of images, he does not deal with the unique characteristics of the comics medium, which provides special advantages for a creator seeking to engage an audience on many levels. Comics theorists have argued that the comics form is an unusually interactive form of media. Drawing on reader-response criticism, critics such as literary scholar Charles Hatfield emphasize that the form's hybridity is unusually adept at creating the sense of incompleteness that invites the reader's act of interpretation.¹⁵ Hatfield writes,

The fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable. As Robert P. Fletcher observes, this fragmentation urges readers to take a critical role, for comic art "calls attention to its fictionality by displaying its narrative seams" (381).¹⁶ The reader's responsibility for negotiating meaning can never be forgotten, for

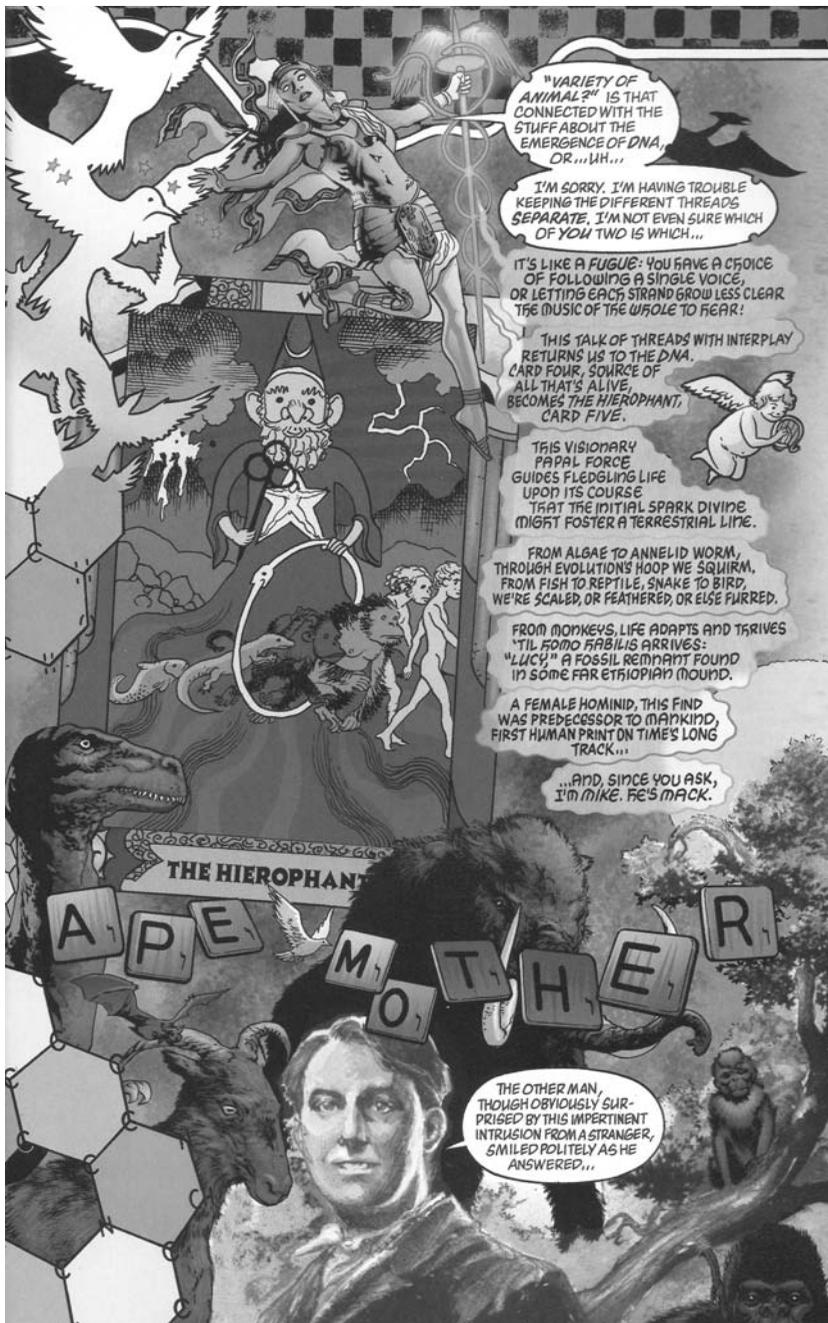
the breakdown of comics into discrete visual quanta continually foregrounds the reader's involvement. The very discontinuity of the page urges readers to do the work of inference, to negotiate over and over the passage from submissive reading to active interpreting.¹⁷

Hatfield laments that American criticism on comics reading tends to fall into two camps: that comics are a "stepping stone" towards literacy because they are "easy," or that they discourage the development of complete literacy because they are "easy."¹⁸ Yet, the ability to deeply read a comic requires a complex grasp of the many ways comics represent time, interrelate word and text, and use borders and layout to indicate narrative sequence, to name just a few of the "codes of signification" with which Hatfield is concerned. He accuses existing comics scholarship in English of "skimming" rather than "reading" comics by ignoring the increasingly sophisticated forms that an experienced comics-reading audience makes possible.¹⁹ For Hatfield, comics are a potentially "demanding" medium, one that asks a great deal from a reader who engages in the interpretive act of forming a relationship with the text. The tension between formal elements (word and text) that he sees as central to the medium insists on a "different order of literacy," one that is visual as well as textual.²⁰

To take advantage of the complexities made possible by the comics medium, Moore and artist JH Williams use, unusual page layouts and juxtapositions between text and images to capture the mood of Sophie/Promethea's psychedelic travels in the Immaterialia, the realm of the imagination. Panel borders curve, turn wavy, or melt entirely; other panels wrap around occult symbols or are grasped by beasts, angels, or demons. In some cases, there are no panel borders at all, and several progressive scenes stretch across what would normally be a splash page (i.e., a page-sized single panel). This experimentation is taken to an extreme in *Promethea* #12, which is structured as one elaborate, multi-layered 24-page comics panel. Based on the astral advice of one of the previous Prometheas, Sophie attempts to converse with the two snakes of her caduceus, her magical weapon and the classic symbol of both Hermes and the medical profession. She pleads, "I need to understand magic, and I think I've reached a point where just studying it in books isn't enough. I need to understand it from the inside." Perhaps this is also exactly where Moore seeks to take his readers, inside the "magic circus of the mind." This February 2001 issue, in which the snakes guide Promethea on a journey of discovery with the Major Arcana cards of the

Tarot deck as signposts, is a strange reading experience, only exceeded by Promethea's later journey into each sphere of the kabbalistic Tree of Life. Each page combines the snakes' narration, Sophie/Promethea's questions, Tarot cards, and Scrabble letters spelling out anagrams for the word "Promethea" with the text of a joke told by various incarnations of twentieth-century magician Aleister Crowley (see Figure 1). Abandoning any semblance of traditional comic paneling, the issue impressionistically mixes images and dialogue balloons, layering imagery so thickly that it is practically impossible for the reader to absorb everything at first reading. Even Sophie confesses that she is "having trouble keeping the different threads separate." The snakes Mack and Mike (nicknames for "macrocosm" and "microcosm") give her and the reader valuable advice: "It's like a fugue: you have a choice of following a single voice, or letting each strand grow less clear the music of the whole to hear."²¹

In this issue, Moore emphasizes the Tarot's dual aspects as both lexicon and narrative, as Mack and Mike explain each card of the Tarot as a stage in the creation of the Universe and, ultimately, human history. For instance, the Hanged Man card represents the Dark Ages, Art (or Temperance) represents the Renaissance, the Moon represents the Nuclear Age, and the Sun represents the late 1960s, in which the playing children of the traditional Tarot image are Flower Children. In keeping with the theme of macrocosm and microcosm, the comic presents Crowley, perhaps the most influential writer of the early-twentieth-century occult movement, progressing from a fetal stage through childhood, adulthood, old age, and death as he simultaneously tells his joke, which doubles as a meditation on the power of thought and perception. Crowley's text is echoed by the dialogue between Sophie and the snakes through the use of repeated phrases and puns. Like Sophie/Promethea, the reader is invited to actively seek and interpret connections between these narrative threads. As the issue's various titles ("The Magic Theatre," "A Pop Art Happening," "A Poetry and Light Show") indicate, Moore intends the comic to be performative, interactive, and experiential in the same vein as *The Birth Caul* and *Snakes and Ladders*, spoken word pieces that Moore performed just prior to writing the early issues of *Promethea*. In fact, Moore has stated that writing *Promethea* specifically emerged from these performances and his intention to work on the subconscious minds of audiences through a multimedia sensory overload. He likens this overload to a "fugue state" or a psychedelic drug



"VARIETY OF ANIMALISM IS THAT CONNECTED WITH THE STUFF ABOUT THE EMERGENCE OF DNA, OR...UH..."

I'M SORRY, I'M HAVING TROUBLE KEEPING THE DIFFERENT THREADS SEPARATE, I'M NOT EVEN SURE WHICH OF YOU TWO IS WHICH...

IT'S LIKE A FUGUE: YOU HAVE A CHOICE OF FOLLOWING A SINGLE VOICE, OR LETTING EACH STRAND GROW LESS CLEAR THE MUSIC OF THE WHOLE TO HEAR!

THIS TALK OF THREADS WITH INTERPLAY RETURNS US TO THE DNA. CARD FOUR, SOURCE OF ALL THAT'S ALIVE, BECOMES THE HIEROPHANT, CARD FIVE.

THIS VISIONARY PAPAL FORCE GUIDES FLEDGLING LIFE UPON ITS COURSE THAT THE INITIAL SPARK DIVINE MIGHT FOSTER A TERRESTRIAL LINE.

FROM ALGAE TO ANnelid WORM, THROUGH EVOLUTION'S HOOP WE SQUIRM, FROM FISH TO REPTILE, SNAKE TO BIRD, WE'RE SCALED, OR FEATHERED, OR ELSE FURRED.

FROM MONKEYS, LIFE ADAPTS AND THRIVES 'TIL *HOMO FABILIS* ARRIVES: "LUCY" A FOSSIL REMNANT FOUND IN SOME FAR ETHIOPIAN MOUND.

A FEMALE HOMINID, THIS FIND WAS PREDECESSOR TO MANKIND, FIRST HUMAN PRINT ON TIME'S LONG TRACK...

...AND, SINCE YOU ASK, I'M MIKE. BE'S MACK.

THE HIEROPHANT
A P E M O T H E R

THE OTHER MAN, THOUGH OBVIOUSLY SURPRISED BY THIS IMPERTINENT INTRUSION FROM A STRANGER, SMILED POLITELY AS HE ANSWERED...

Figure 1. A page from *Promethea* #12, demonstrating a visual fugue.

trip in which the individual experiences a sequence of events simultaneously. *Promethea* #12 attempts to both capture and communicate this state of mind.²²

Moore's explorations of the hermetic kabbalah, where the visual is combined with the linguistic in a way that makes abstract occult philosophy satisfyingly concrete, are intended to be equally as experiential as the Tarot issue. Each of ten issues is dedicated to a sephira (a particular emanation or power of the divine) on the cosmic map known as the Tree of Life, and each attempts to capture a different mode of consciousness. Moore's exploration of the emotional sphere of Netzach is given form in oceanic, softly bordered blues and greens, suggesting both salty tears and the characters' helplessness when caught up in currents of love and grief; the harsh severity of Gevurah is rendered entirely in red and black and communicated in heavy lines and deep shadows; the shining sphere of Keter, the source of creation, is printed in gold on white, the words of the characters' dialogue fading in slowly as if they were only just coming into being. As Sophie and Barbara climb the tree, the issues' artistic styles — drawing on artists as diverse as Andy Warhol and Vincent Van Gogh — veer increasingly toward abstraction, as the characters travel away from the concrete material world and toward the limitless ineffability of pure existence. Though occultists have written dozens of books attempting to characterize the states of consciousness that make up the Tree of Life, only Moore and Williams have realized them so vividly, transforming them from dry correspondence tables correlating colors, smells, and personality traits into living environments open to anyone with eyes to see. The dialogue between Sophie/Promethea and Barbara allows the reader textual access to their psychic and emotional states as they verbally describe what they are experiencing.

Because of its focus on language and magic in the intellectual sphere of Hod, *Promethea* #15 is a particularly apt illustration of Moore's methods of audience engagement. In the hermetic kabbalah, which was adapted from the traditional Jewish kabbalah by the Golden Dawn in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, planetary correspondences are given enormous weight, and Hod is heavily marked by the influence of Mercury.²³ The issue is colored in a palette of primarily orange and gold, and the Greco-Roman god Mercury (or Hermes) and the Egyptian god Thoth both figure prominently in the narrative as representations of communication, intellect, mathematics, and scholarship. The style of the issue is heavily influenced by M. C. Escher, whose visual experiments



Figure 3. Hermes acknowledges the reader in *Promethea* #15.

wall to turn to the audience, and the elegant coloring gives his eyes an eerie glow (see Figure 3).²⁷ The effect and implication is that because the gods are made of language, they are present in the book the reader is holding. The reader, in turn, is included in a narrative being played out as part of the ongoing development of creation. Sophie's story is not simply entertainment, Moore insists; the forces she is experiencing are part of the reality that shapes the reader's experience. Hermes' breaking of the fourth wall is an invitation to experience the blurring between story and reality, and to see oneself as a story being told in the mind of God, just as Moore tells Sophie's tale.

In addition to its subject matter, the visuality of alchemical literature may be a direct influence on contemporary occult texts like Moore's. Western esotericism scholar Arthur Versluis has argued for what he calls "ahistorical continuity" in various occult traditions that have been passed down through literature and art, rather than through a direct (teacher to student) initiatory lineage.²⁸ He specifically points to the many diagrams and drawings in these dense alchemical texts, such as those of Robert Fludd and Michael Meier. The purpose of these pervasive illustrations in theosophic, Rosicrucian, and alchemical literature, Versluis maintains,

is to emphasize and amplify the hieratic nature of these traditions. If a book is to serve an initiatic function, it can better do so if it reveals its subject in words and images both. In this way, the book becomes hieroglyphic — it is not merely an abstract discussion *about* some topic, it actually reveals (*hiera-*) the nature of its subject.²⁹

Almost restating Moore's assertion about the comic being the magical experience itself rather than merely a report of it, Versluis describes a sympathy between an esoteric author and his or her reader that prompts a "gnostic shift in consciousness" — an experience of divinely revealed

knowledge that cannot be fully captured in words. This imaginative participation allows the reader or audience "to participate in a work and to be transmuted by it, an initiatory process that takes places through words and image, or through what we may also call the induced vision of art."³⁰

Moore invites the audience's participation in *Promethea* most explicitly in the final issue of the series — appropriately, the thirty-second issue, conforming to the thirty-two paths of the Tree of Life. Probably the most ambitious of all the issues of the series, #32 has thirty-two pages of non-ordered panels consisting of overlapping line drawings brushed with psychedelic pastels and sprinkled with stars and ankhs. Text balloons describing occult principles, scientific theorems, historical facts, and descriptions of tarot paths and sephirot are tangled together with a monologue in which Promethea directly addresses the reader. According to the supplement in the final trade paperback collection, Moore's script begins with the punning note, "Okay, this is a very strange artefact we're putting together here, but if we all stay calm it should work like a dream."³¹ Readers are encouraged to remove the pages from the final issue and juxtapose them in whatever way they choose. However, when put in a certain order, the pages form poster-sized paintings of Promethea's face, which emerges from what otherwise looks like a jumble of random images and text. In the trade paperback, both of these paintings are included as reduced size posters.

The initiation the reader is being invited to experience in this issue is twofold: the issue offers a tactile activity that calls attention to the illusory nature of time and also illustrates the reader's participation in discerning larger patterns in apparent randomness. Promethea's address to the reader implicates the audience in the process of creating this magical "artefact." In her final farewell, she says, "I've enjoyed our dance. You were the perfect partner, and I'm going to miss you. But spacetime is eternal, with everything in it. And you and me are always here, always now. You and me are *forever*."³² This remark reflects Moore's continuing fascination with quantum theories of time (going back at least as far as *Watchmen*), specifically the notion that it is only our conscious minds that order events into a linear sequence; a perspective is possible in which all events happen at once. In interviews, Moore cites Stephen Hawking's notion of time as a football with the Big Bang and the Big Crunch on either end, what Moore describes as a "gigantic hyper mind in which everything is occurring."³³ In this godlike perspective, all events are connected and nothing is ever truly lost, death being only

one point on a timeline. Similarly, the reader of a comic book is able to scan an entire page of sequential panels at once, or flip back to the beginning of the book and re-experience the process of perception. Thus, according to Moore, comics have a unique ability to provide non-linear imagery outside of time; comic fiction occurs in an eternal present in what comics scholar Annalisa Di Liddo calls “a ceaselessly evolving, metamorphic narrative continuum.”³⁴ Further, in assembling the faces of *Promethea*, the reader is given an object lesson in the nature of reality as Moore sees it. The comic is, in visual form, an analogy for the way consciousness creates meaning. Although the information on the pages appears to be a confused muddle when seen one piece at a time, when the puzzle is completed and the reader stands back, the face of a benevolent goddess — imagination Herself — is revealed. Through the participation of the reader, a larger and more meaningful pattern emerges from apparent chaos.

In this simple cut-and-paste activity, Moore attempts to communicate an experience of a benevolent divine consciousness, one which lovingly embraces all time and space, yet is always necessarily more than the sum of its parts. Indeed, this also seems to be the ultimate message of the apocalypse of the imagination that Moore envisions in *Promethea* #31. Although *Promethea* does end the world, she does not do it on a physical level; rather, her apocalypse is the paradigm-shattering experience that all of being is interconnected, interdependent, and ultimately one.³⁵ Speaking directly to the reader, *Promethea* offers a vision in which all human beings see the divine reflected in themselves, in every other human being, and in everything that is. Having invited the reader to sit with her by a cheery fireplace and hold her hand, she presents a series of mandalas, which are commonly used in Eastern religious art for devotional purposes. In this case, Moore seems to have chosen the circular designs for their connotations of wholeness and unity. “This, then, is revelation,” *Promethea* tells the audience.

All is one, and all is deity, this beautiful undying fire of being that is everywhere about us, that we are. O man, O woman, know yourself, and know you are divine. Respect yourself, respect the least phenomenon of your existence as if it were the breath of God. [. . .] Know you are everything, forever. Know I love you.³⁶

In the aftermath of this experience, which Moore portrays as occurring

simultaneously to all people around the world, nothing can be the same; the dualism that fuels agonistic thinking and the resulting conflicts is (at least temporarily) dissolved. When *Promethea* reaches out her hand to the reader, she offers a glimpse of this interconnected perspective: the reader, whoever he or she may be, is a beloved, full participant in the unfolding of Being. Moore further includes the reader — and himself! — in this experience through the use of a number of self-reflexive scenes: in the moments before the key event, the illustrator and Moore both turn to the reader while working on *Promethea*'s script pages at a computer screen, and Moore mutters, "Uh oh." Elizabeth K. Rosen describes this moment as one "in which both reader and creators acknowledge their imaginative partnership."³⁷ The very act of reading becomes a collaboration.

From the perspectives of viewer/reader-response, performance theory, and comics theory, there are excellent theoretical reasons for why *Promethea* might trigger meditative, devotional, or religious states in the reader. Yet the question remains: in practice, does the comic *work*? Does it, in fact, provide the "gnostic shift in consciousness" Versluis attributes to successful occult texts? Responses to the comic as it was being released in serial format suggest that not all readers appreciated Moore's effort at occult education; in a December 2002 interview, Moore jovially remarked,

[W]e have lost several thousand readers over the course of this saga, not as many as I'd expected, and the ones that remain are either dedicated and firm in their resolve, or else have had their cerebral cortex so badly damaged by the last four or five issues that they are no longer capable of formulating a complaint[.]³⁸

Some readers balked at the didactic nature of the kabbalistic issues, as critic Douglas Wolk acknowledges in his review of the entire series. Wolk notes their "ungainly expository dialogue" and instances of Moore "threaten[ing] to strain an eyelid from winking so hard," even while praising the complex and engaging visuals.³⁹ While Wolk agrees with readers who felt that Moore was lecturing at them, however, he ultimately defends *Promethea*, claiming, "The idea of it isn't to tell a story so much as to present a gigantic mass of arcane philosophy as entertainingly and memorably as possible."⁴⁰

This purpose has been borne out by the fact that, in trade paperback

form, the comic has become known in the occult and Pagan communities as an accessible introduction to hermetic kabbalah. T. Thorn Coyle, occult writer and initiate of the Feri tradition of witchcraft, assigns the Tree of Life issues of *Promethea* to her advanced students as a way to “get [their] feet wet” before moving on to other kabbalistic texts.⁴¹ An October 2007 newsletter produced by a body of the occult order Ordo Templi Orientis in Kentucky reviewed the books as “an ideal teaching tool for new magicians,” advertising *Promethea* next to articles on Pagan Pride Day and contemporary Pagans in the military.⁴² In March 2009, Pagan news blogger Jason Pitzl-Waters wrote in *The Wild Hunt* that

Moore is, for all intents and purposes, “one of us.” By that I mean he’s an occultist/magician who possibly worships the “sock-puppet god” Glycon, and is currently hard at work writing “*a clear and practical grimoire of the occult sciences*.” In addition, he also wrote an outstanding 32-issue comic series that doubled as primer in magic entitled “Promethea.” [. . .] I think that in retrospect, historians of our wider religious and philisophical [*sic*] movement will pay far more attention to the influence of people like Moore than the dozens of “Wicca 101” niche writers we currently argue and debate over.⁴³

While it is unclear whether *Promethea* works as a “conversion” text, anecdotal evidence like the above suggests that within the Pagan and occult movements, *Promethea* is seen as an introductory work meant to draw the new witch or magician more deeply into religious belief and practice. Such evidence suggests that for a prepared reader — one who already has interest in the art of conscious-change, if not much knowledge — *Promethea* can function effectively as a religious text.

Moore himself denies that he has “religious” intentions, but admits that *Promethea* is “a magical rant disguised as a superheroine comic.” Here, he matter-of-factly defines “magic” as “simply a new way of seeing the ordinary universe that surrounds us, and ourselves as creatures in that universe.”⁴⁴ Although Moore acknowledges that the comic may have turned off casual readers, he does note how many readers have been “genuinely appreciative” and read *Promethea* primarily because it *is* instructive in Western occultism. As far as whether he intends to “convert” his readers, Moore ultimately draws a distinction between what he is doing and religion:

All I would be urging people to do in *Promethea* is to explore, in their own way, by whatever means they personally feel comfortable with, using whatever system they happen to feel comfortable with, whether that be Christianity, or paganism, or Hinduism, or anything else, to explore the kind of rich world that I think all of us have inside us. I just want to tell them that that world is there, that there are a variety of ways of exploring it. It doesn't really matter which way you use, or which system you adopt. It's a territory I find very rewarding, very fulfilling, very human. To point out that territory to other people is something I feel happy about doing. To erect a huge church there and officiate over rituals, is not.⁴⁵

Moore is continuing his innovative efforts in occult education with his in-development *Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic*, due out in 2013. Stating his desire to create a book on magic "intended for a mass populace,"⁴⁶ Moore is designing the text like a children's activity book, including fact sheets on the history of magic in the style of *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and accompanying board games that illustrate occult principles. With the *Bumper Book*, Moore intends to more fully emphasize the playful nature of magic, and claims, "We want it to be incredibly entertaining, we want it to be a real lot of fun, we want it to have activities that you can play and things that you can do that will be genuinely magically instructive."⁴⁷ Clearly, Moore intends for the pedagogical experiment that began with his live performance pieces and developed into *Promethea* to reach an even more mainstream audience.

Promethea remains a challenging work, one that demands a level of engagement from the reader that disallows the ironic distance from one's entertainment that postmodernity encourages. Yet in its potential use for meditation or devotion and its intent to spiritually educate, *Promethea* is solidly within a long tradition of sequential art and Western religious art in general. Further, Moore's work illustrates the unique advantages of the comics medium for religious purposes: the ability to convey substantial amounts of information through text while also presenting the reader with the emotional impact of images makes comics an especially rich medium for reaching out to the spiritual seeker. With Pagans and occult practitioners now enthusiastically embracing Moore as "one of us," *Promethea* has become an important text for those interested in the growth of these new religious movements.

Notes

- 1 "Imaginary Lines," in Alan Moore (w), JH Williams (p), and Mick Gray (i), *Promethea* #3 (Oct 1999), unpaginated.
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- 4 The comic book versions of *The Birth Caul* (1999) and *Snakes and Ladders* (2001) are collected in Moore and Campbell, *A Disease of Language*. Both pieces are also available as recordings produced with Tim Perkins, as are *The Moon and Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels* (1996), *The Highbury Working* (2000), and Moore's tribute to William Blake, *Angel Passage* (2002).
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- 7 Alan Moore (w), JH Williams (p), and Mick Gray (i), *Promethea* Book 1 (La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics, 2000), unpaginated, reprint of *Promethea* #1.
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- 18 Hatfield, 36.
- 19 Hatfield, 66.
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- 29 Versluis, 142.
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