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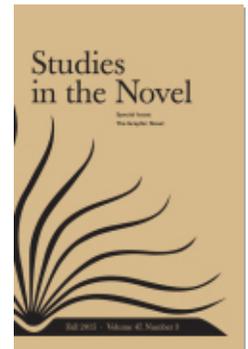
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## THE MONSTROUS ALCHEMY OF ALAN MOORE: *PROMETHEA* AS LITERACY NARRATIVE

TRACEE L. HOWELL

I am having trouble with this book. But this book has none with itself, and none with *Promethea*...

– Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*<sup>1</sup>

It's no secret that the comic/graphic novel still lurks on the outskirts of the university-inscribed literary sphere. Many scholars have told the tale of this marginalization, of the relegation to academic liminality (Berninger, Ecke, and Haberkorn 4). Still, scholarly interest in comics seems to have moved mainstream, even while the genre itself remains textual Other within the academy. As Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester have pointed out:

The burgeoning of comics studies is testified to by a wide array of evidence: impressive new biographies and monographs; the construction of a scholarly infrastructure (archives, conferences, journals, listserv groups, and so on); greater theoretical ambition and sophistication; the internationalization of comics scholarship (facilitated by the web); the recovery of lost classics; and the growing audience for talks, books, and articles on the history, aesthetics, craft, and politics of comics. (XI)

For those of us researching the comic and graphic novel, the story of textual abjection is both professional charm and curse. In the twenty-first-century academy, with grit, a bit of luck, and the will to survive, one may capitalize on one's abjection, even turn the monstrous into gold. Yet this can very easily become a fixed state; once a boundary-crossing has been made, dwell forever on the margins we must, celebrated as Other, labeled as literary heretic or harridan. Our foul is fair, and fair foul indeed.<sup>2</sup> Yet perhaps all scholarly work ever has been such equivocation and ever thus shall be: our monsters are ourselves. We consume texts and spin careers; this is what we all do, this is how the modern Western academy has survived since its medieval

origins in the Catholic church. As medievalist and cultural critic Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it in his *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*: “Do monsters really exist? Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?” (20).

In his now famous comic theorization of the medium entitled *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argued—and demonstrated visually—that comics are “more than” simply hybrid texts, that their juxtaposition of pictorial image and word creates a kind of “magic and mystery” (66). For McCloud, it’s precisely the reader’s rather mysterious experience of movement in a comic, or what he calls the mystical “dance of the seen and the unseen”—the process of connecting word to image within individual comic panels, and making causal connections between panels—that leads to narrative closure and thus to readerly comprehension. Crossing the “gutter,” the space between each panel, is a magical practice, one that readers learn to do with comics. This is why McCloud states that “something strange and wonderful happens in this blank ribbon of paper”: because the spaces between units of visual and textual meaning in a comic force readers to fill in their own blanks. Comics and graphic narratives, then, uniquely require their readers to actively participate in meaning construction, in the learned craft of reading both what is visibly presented in each panel, and what is invisible. As McCloud writes, “No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92).

McCloud’s analysis certainly advanced the status of the comic within the academy, demonstrating what many of us who teach the genre have discovered: if casual reading of the comic demands such active cognitive commitment, the level of rigor required of scholarly readers is deep indeed. Rather than ye old institutionalized intellectual snobbery, might it be their very rigor that allows graphic narratives to remain on the academic margins? It seems clear that the comic resists traditional (or what has been institutionalized as “traditional”) methods of reading, and of literary analysis and critique, precisely because it enacts so many monstrous layers of meaning at once, all which require the ongoing complicity and active, conscious commitment of the reader. Cohen, who uses the notion of monstrosity to explore the abjected “Other” in Western culture, explains “monster” as:

Best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement; never through dissection-table analysis. (x)

In a scholarly setting, certainly to seek to comprehend that which resists capture—let alone the application of the traditional tools of analysis—is to cross a significant boundary, one where our traditional analytic tools, our steely knives of cold logic, our sure foundations of genre and disciplinary fields, our technical terminologies, may be of little use. What, we might very well ask

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, might it mean to know a product, even one of our own devices and desires,<sup>3</sup> “through process and movement”?

This is no new question, and of course it is one in response to which many now-legendary Others—such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva to name but two whose work has inspired Cohen’s meditations on monstrosity—have fleshed out incredibly juicy narratives and often subsequently-abjected fields of scholarly inquiry. On the whole, and for perhaps understandable reason, our profession has little truck with textual anarchy; despite the acts of rebellion that occur every now and then, institutions tend toward and depend upon very traditional kinds of claims to definitive knowledge. Categories are our bread and butter, even when we blur them, especially when we exoticize them, although we often problematize them. However, if and when one finds oneself posited professionally always already beyond the accepted disciplinary boundaries (even in secret), what if we then choose to acknowledge our desire to embrace the abject? Why not throw caution to the wind? Rather than constantly minding the gap, what if we simply choose to explore our gutterization and all that might be found therein?<sup>4</sup> Why not look explicitly *to* the marginalized text for clues, for radical understanding, for a *technê* of *différance*? When facing an epistemological quandary of such monstrous proportions, after all, it may be wise to remember—and perhaps to allow ourselves the luxury of reveling in—the notion of *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*.

As Cixous writes in her own *Book of Promethea*, “In the end, going from illusion to illusion, one also comes to understand the world.” Fiction is a kind of magical knowledge; there has always been something frighteningly radical about story, with its power to allow human beings to order and to transcend time, to transform ourselves and others, to take on new identities and to have new experiences, some of which may not be possible in our daily lives. Yet (as our own professional narrative goes), the scholar’s job is, seemingly, to dissect and break down, to define in order to know, to know in order to work/eat. How is it we ever find the chutzpah to analyze any story, living within our own stories, professional and non, as we are? It does rather seem that one only ever becomes truly, painfully aware of dominant narratives when one finds oneself outside of or oppressed by such dominance. Such is the human condition, perhaps.

I want to suggest that for literary scholars seeking illumination through “process and movement,” rather than through the fixed business of classification and categorization, the comic, as Scott McCloud has so cogently demonstrated, may well open a door to the kind of magical mystery tour of nonlinear epistemology envisioned by the philosopher-critic-writers of the late twentieth century. And where better to experience magic than in the work of Alan Moore, legendary deconstructionist and self-professed wizard? Master of the multi-chronic, of un-logic, of lush and horrid fantasy, Alan Moore is the loving creator of many magical beasts and mysterious texts to be sure. But no

comic delves more deeply into McCloud's notion of compositional alchemy in content, form, and style than Moore's graphic series *Promethea* (America's Best Comics, 1999–2005).

Via Moore's storyline, via the dynamic art and ink-work of J. H. Williams and Mick Gray, via the trio's convention-busting approach to narrative pacing and paneling, *Promethea* takes us on a revelatory exploration of the comic/graphic novel *qua* imaged-narrative, along the way forcing readers into the kinds of existential "gutters" where more than simple McCloudian blood<sup>5</sup> may be found, but the stuff of human imagination and creativity itself. Achieving narrative closure in Moorean texts can be difficult for readers; his work often seems wonderfully and stubbornly dedicated to reminding us that closure is a process always being enacted, a recursive re-construction of meaning that doubles back upon itself even as the reader advances in the text. As Annalisa Di Liddo has written of Moore, his texts usually resist either a linear or singular interpretation: "the encyclopedic and often intricate nature of his creations makes it impossible to single out univocal or unambiguous interpretations;" even more specifically, she describes *Promethea* as "a ceaselessly evolving, metamorphic narrative continuum" ("Afterword" 201; *Comics as Performance* 95). To wit, scholars have witnessed and explored a wide variety of ideas and issues in *Promethea*; from queer desire to spiritual liberation to radical eros, there seems to be a little something for everyone who takes on this textual experience. Daring in its radicalism, reveling in its abjection, and, thus, profoundly challenging to read, as a heteroglossic text *par excellence*, *Promethea* truly is a text that resists any one critical approach or univocalist reading. But perhaps this is part of the lesson, part of *Promethea*'s gift<sup>6</sup> to humankind, if we will put down our analytic tools long enough to take it in: there is never only one reading in operation, never only one story being told, and as Raul Ricoeur noted thirty years ago, we are always already part of the telling.<sup>7</sup>

*Promethea*, which ran as a comic series of thirty-two issues, is, in Moore's words, "a protracted rant on magic":

The first 11 issues were a precarious balancing act, but by and large people were still thinking, "Well, it could be a superhero comic, yeah, we'll keep buying it." Then we got to issue 12, when we did all the tarot stuff? (Clarke)

Not only a rant, it seems, this slippery hero-narrative in disguise, but a tribute to magic in literary romanticism as well as a typically-Moorean statement on the limits placed on human expression in twentieth-century American culture:

*Promethea* raised some interesting ideas, particularly about current American culture, which seems to be about restricting ideas and the number of things that people can actually think about, in an almost Orwellian way. So we were saying, look, you don't have to be an atheist or a born-again Christian or a

Muslim or in any other isolated and absolute position, but there is this huge palette of human possibilities that you can explore. It's probably a more constructive way to use your mind. It gives you a greater reverence for almost every aspect of existence. It's very similar to the Romantic position. William Blake was a Romantic, he was also an occultist and a visionary. It's all the same territory. (Clarke)

For literary scholars, delineating territory—the better to stake a claim—is precisely our business, or so the dominant story of professionalism goes. Moore's perspective, while certainly academically taboo, is helpful for readers to keep in mind when approaching *Promethea*, a text that plays not only with the limits of the comics genre, but that of the novel, with its now often-forgotten checkered past—at least within the academy—as witchy blend of “fact” and “fiction,” of troubling blur of the “real” and the “romance.” *Promethea* is a rigorous guide to comics literacy; in giving ourselves up to the text we learn how to read the text. Yet Moore's self-reflexive gesture transcends the comics genre. Since its narrative is one that is ultimately about the construction of the self—the divine self—or the imaginative, creative self that is for Moore at the core of the magic of human consciousness, *Promethea* forces the reader to become aware, often uncomfortably so, of that continual process of collaborative narrative construction within any text of any genre. *Promethea* is a story about story, and about our constant readerly participation in the construction of the tale(s). As Di Liddo points out, “a text whose protagonist is a story cannot but end up becoming a reflection on the ways stories are told and language is used” (*Comics as Performance* 95). This is an especially poignant metanarrative for scholarly readers to be sure.

Moore's *Promethea* begins in meta-mode, in a fanciful blur of the literary “real” and “romance.” A preface to the text, “The Promethea Puzzle: An Adventure in Folklore,” signed by Alan Moore, purports to provide an historic context for the story to come by introducing the names of writers and artists who have served as creators of the Promethean mythos over time, tracing a literary history, in effect, and analyzing the character's meaning within the literary sphere. While one certainly expects story at the start of *Promethea*, it may indeed take readers some time and/or research (it did me) to realize that Moore's author's preface, this “history,” is itself also fiction, itself part of the larger, multi-layered story. Christina Hoff Kraemer warns in her exploration of the presentation of erotic love as divine in the text that “*Promethea* appears to work best for prepared readers” (151), and this is both true and perhaps an impossible feat, with narrative layering so complex as we find in issue after issue of this comic, starting with the preface. Moore's signed essay reads like academic prose, like a professorial account that both provides a helpful overview of *Promethea*'s impact upon literary culture and bemoans the loss of this mythic figure in current fiction. “Moore,” the fictionalized signatory, writes:

Given the current popularity of simplistic post-modern characters such as the inexplicably celebrated Weeping Gorilla, perhaps it's simply that times have moved on, and that there is no longer a place for the romantic fantasy and play of the imagination that *Promethea* represents. We can only hope that she is merely resting in some corner of the Realm of Faerie, or of Hy Brasil and that in the future, she'll turn up in a new guise, some fresh twist to her puzzling history, a genuine piece of American folklore in action, of poetry in motion.

To begin a story with such a frame is Moorean meta-narrative craft at its best. In placing himself there, as a character mourning the loss of real meaning amongst postmodern literary culture, Moore at once satirizes the postmodern and destabilizes the same universalist meaning that twentieth-century post-modern approaches to textual study sought to challenge.

Orion Ussner Kidder applies Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction, especially her notion of "complicit critique," to her study of sexuality in the text, writing, "postmodernism...is preoccupied with satire and metafiction, modes which construct something—the subject of satire, the sanctity of the fictional world—in order to then deconstruct it" (179). For scholars, this particular Moorean device, one meant to "introduce information about the character before the actual story starts," in Di Liddo's estimation (*Alan Moore* 87), is especially compelling. Here is a graphic novel that begins with a fictional literary history of a lost character<sup>8</sup>—and one that reflects the particular culture of our academic sphere: its concerns, its values, its logics, its desires. With this use of the passing trope—fiction passing as scholarly history—from the get-go, this graphic novel signals an intention to signify as part of our academic cultural body. Is it satire, this essay? Is it parody? Is this what literary scholars have come to call "deconstruction"? Hard to tell. Certainly we must read it as an especially vital critique, or, depending on our level of self-awareness, as "complicit critique," after Hutcheon and Derrida. This moment of cultural awareness is the metaphorical moment that Cohen speaks of in the first thesis of his monster theory when he writes: "The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (4). Moore has us at our own crossroads with this text, right from the get-go.

Given the publication timeframe of the series, as well as the general perspective of Moore's corpus, it seems impossible to dispute that *Promethea* is born of a particular cultural moment and more specifically of a particular interpretation of a particular cultural moment. I suspect most scholars would agree that at the turn of the twenty-first century the literary sphere as a whole is dominated by the academic discourse of the postmodernity of popular culture, and perhaps by the notion that the discourse itself is not only actively complicit in its own critique, but self-consciously so, anxiously so. At least this seemed to me then (and yet now) to be the dominant story of the time. Thus, by

beginning with such a culturally-specific preface, *Promethea* is a monster that in Cohen's words "quite literally incorporates [our] fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy...giving them life" (4). This is a text that explicitly embodies *us*. As a graphic novel, and so an exiled text, *Promethea* is always already a dangerous incorporation—what might it mean for we scholars to see ourselves not just in word, but in image? From its first word as sign, *Promethea* serves us notice that in Cohen's terms, "the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant" (4). We are that reader-interpreter, and it seems that with *Promethea* our task is to read this mark, this glyph, in both word and image as that sign which reveals ourselves.

Yes, not at all taken aback, but enchanted, ready to be refuted and be converted, making no distinction between abstract and concrete, without respecting the famous invisible and shimmering line between different sorts of things, the unobtainable, improbably, hence undeniable and absolutely indelible divinity. (Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*)

In *Promethea*, we are introduced in a scholarly fashion to a meta-fictional character that has occupied (fictional) writers of fiction over many years. This (fictional) literary history serves as preface to another layer of story, the primary narrative of *Promethea*, which begins—again—with another preface, this one primarily in image and serving to provide us with a kind of pre-history to *Promethea* proper.<sup>9</sup> The first panel of vol. 1 takes us to Alexandria, 411 AD, where we learn of the origins of Promethea, a human child who flees her father's murderers—violent Christian priests who are threatened by his knowledge: "They are coming for me, as they came for beautiful Hypatia," he says. Next, we time-travel via panel to New York, 1999 AD, the time-setting of the main narrative. This is an alt-NY, a self-important, self-styled "Radiant, Heavenly City,"<sup>10</sup> one with levitating cabs, flying saucers, and a city landscape that is dominated by hyper-mediation—signs are everywhere, to such an extent that meaning itself is immediately deconstructed: the overabundance of meaning signifies its meaninglessness. Here again we see the novel itself is a creature of its time, a reflection of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American politics as well as the primacy of academic discourse. As readers discover near the end of the series, this is an apocalyptic text, and Moore sets the doom of the world in NYC.<sup>11</sup>

In alt-NY two students are discussing the research they've done for their term papers. While her friend Stacia is writing "a discourse on Weeping Gorilla" (the popular fictional character we first meet in the fictional literary history, a Moorean deconstruction of the postmodern<sup>12</sup>), Sophie Bangs is researching the mysterious Promethea for her paper, the very same mythic literary character of which we learned in the preface. After being forced to confront ourselves-as-scholars in word with that fictional scholarly preface, in

meeting this protagonist, we immediately face ourselves visually in the form of the young scholar Sophie Bangs; her name certainly a signifier for we seekers of wisdom, and (we learn later on) for the apocalypse/rebirth that she, in the form of Promethea, is to bring to the world later in the narrative.

It becomes clear, as we read, that Sophie's research parallels the history we are given in the preface, and for many readers this is perhaps the moment when that literary history is finally revealed to be fiction, part of the story. As Sophie's knowledge of Promethea grows, we again encounter the notion of knowledge as power and as incredibly dangerous; we begin to see the narrative pre-history set in Egypt as key foreshadow to Sophie's current-day experience. Indeed, when Sophie's scholarly inquiries call forth a dark, shadowy creature—a Smee—to hunt her, it is the current-day iteration of Promethea who comes to save her. Promethea is incorporated in the body of a middle-aged woman named Barbara Shelley, former wife of Steve Shelley, who, as Sophie's research (and our fictional literary history) indicates, was a comics writer. Sophie's savior thus appears to her and to us as a kind of late-twentieth-century comic-book superheroine—Promethea!<sup>13</sup> From Barbara/Promethea, we learn that the original Promethea, the little girl in Egypt, was saved from death by “two of her father's gods,” Thoth-Hermes, who, due to “waning” power and influence in the face of Christianity, could only protect Promethea by transporting her to the world of “Imateria,” where she “would no longer be a little girl” but would be “a story.” Thus the *girl* Promethea escapes death by becoming the *story* Promethea, which lives on and on through time. Promethea reappears by coming into being time and time again in different iterations through specific human women. As culture changes, as time moves, and the human imagination shifts, so does the embodiment of Promethea. Promethea is always Promethea, but specifically reconstructed, “bound in a double act of construction and reconstitution,” as Cohen says of the cultural monster (5-6). The character is always already an iteration of culturally-specific imagination, and the version of the Promethea story is born out of the needs of that particular cultural moment.<sup>14</sup>

When Barbara loses her Promethean power after being devastatingly wounded by the Smee, she is immediately forced to teach Sophie the student how to become the next Promethea, and thus how to help them both escape the immediate moment of crisis. This process of embodiment takes place via inscription of the written word (a nod to the magical hybridity of the graphic novel, of the power in communion of image and text, body and soul). Barbara hands her a mini-spiral notebook and says, “Take this. Go find somewhere quiet and write about Promethea. A description, a poem...anything.” Sophie writes a poem, which ends with these lines:

From Fable's day / Descending into Fact's cold / weighty night / From lyric  
atmospheres to / mammal clay. / I am Promethea. / the rumored one, / The

Mythic bough that Reason / strains to bend. / I am that voice left, once the /  
book is done... / I am the dream that / waking does not end.

This is poem read as spell, as powerful conjure, and with it Sophie is able to embody the Promethea story, coming into being as a beautiful, dangerous, and powerful heroine. Her version appears as Egyptian goddess, a reflection perhaps of her knowledge of the divine origins of the Promethea myth. As Promethea, Sophie is able to save Barbara, transporting her directly to a hospital while she herself soon ventures into Immaterialia, the realm of the nonmaterial, of the imaginary, of story. When Sophie/Promethea enters the world of Immaterialia, also referred to in the text as Magic Misty Land and the Land of Faerie, she discovers that all previous versions of the Promethea myth reside there simultaneously. Each story is Promethea, yet they are as varied in appearance, personality and even powers as the specific time-periods from which they arise: the nineteenth century, World War II, the 1950s, the 1970s, etc. These culturally-reflective, diverse Prometheas invite Sophie/Promethea to a wide diversity of new knowledges through many different pathways. Sophie crosses blissfully into territory unbounded by categorization, by hierarchy, by structure. Immaterialia is all; it is chaos, it is light, it is dark. Into such an enchanting abyss the reader enters, following along dutifully with our protagonist Sophie/Promethea.

And that was when I understood I was letting myself be carried along by a vital force far greater than my own. All I did was to follow the fabulous route on a map of the world. (Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*)

Guided by each version of Promethea and armed with a map comprised of monstrous magical symbol, Promethea undertakes an epic journey through Immaterialia. The tarot, the Kabbalahian tree of life, the map of the London Underground, all modes of human knowing are shown to be an interconnected web, and the revealed visual similarities across these various independent systems and languages are rather uncanny to witness. Promethea's journey unveils an explosion of heteroglossia, of human systems of symbols, each one unique yet all one and the same. Layers of visual artifacts that even in their diversity and specificity have unified humanity across time, these magical, mysterious, mystical marks demonstrate the never-fully quenched human desire to know and to believe in the act of knowing. Guided by these signs and an exploration of the act of signification itself, with Promethea we explore the collective unconscious, encountering mythic heroes, demons, angels, and hitherto unseen beasts as well as every other possible idea ever conceptualized or loved into being by humankind. Panel by panel we journey with her into the realm of pure imagination, of creativity and meaning; this is a wholly immersive, sensory exploration of the comic/graphic novel as meaning-

making narrative. The style of artwork shifts with each sign, displaying the playful power of the image to enable its viewer to inhabit a diversity of worlds. As Di Liddo writes in her powerful “Chronotopes: Outer Space, Cityscape, the Space of Comics,” the art design is vital:

As imagination transcends space and time, it cannot but go beyond the borders of panels and pages, which is an essential aspect in Promethea’s narrative and visual organization. The space of the Immatéria is a fluid, changing, perpetually evolving entity; its time seems eternally hanging. (*Comic as Performance* 89)

Sequence is exploded as the literal boundaries of panels are radicalized—some seem to have no limits. Thus, the invitation is issued to us, the readers, to explore unbounded human imagination itself, depicted in art and in word as a realm in which logic has no more power or primacy of place than does emotion, where pictures have no less signifiatory stature than words, where structures of classification, even that of time, are simply one creation among many.

In Immatéria, we confront the monstrous fruits of our creative labors, and they speak to us, interrogating Sophie/Promethea as she goes. The imagination contains multitudes, and Moore does his best to depict them, from the sacred to the profane. It’s worth noting that our guide as we view even *logos*, the word itself, depicted in the form of Christ crucified, is Moore’s female iteration of the condemned god who gifted humankind our forbidden fire. It becomes ever more clear that the story itself is a kind of *technê* that pays respectful deference to yet transcends mere *logos*; it is a magical tool of word and image, a craft and a skill that we are learning to use to read ourselves; to see our own construction of ourselves in all our glory and gore, all our goodness and evil.

This is a naked book, as exposed as Promethea. In its writing it never thought of being read later. I am afraid for it. Yet Promethea never even thinks of being afraid....It is innocent. It never asks itself the questions people ask themselves—and it is right—this is no place to ask them. Innocent as Promethea. (Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*)

While Stacia/Promethea battles the abuse of power in the material world (including her own), Sophie/Promethea faces trials and dangerous beasts in the immaterial realm; she—and we—must cross border after border, must commune with divinity and deviance alike. In a particularly “graphic” section of this graphic novel, Sophie/Promethea seeks out the assistance of a twisted old sorcerer, Jack Faust. The price she must pay for his help is sex: he desires communion with this female embodiment of pure imagination. That Promethea is a female incarnation of mythos, a tale of womanly incarnation of the divine, suddenly takes on a crucial significance for the reader. One recalls that Moore’s tale is not the story of Prometheus, but of Promethea, and questions

of cultural critique come into focus. What might it mean to envision human imagination<sup>15</sup> as female-bodied, to conceive of woman as the incarnation of divinely-bestowed skill and craft? Promethea is powerful and bewitching; this is a monstrous text that seeks to show us ourselves and our own constructed fictions as well as our own power, via divine promethean *technê*, via exiled episteme. *Promethea* is a graphic narrative that instructs us not only in the reading of a medium that has been viewed as monstrous, the comic, but in the arts of imagination and of story itself.

Sophie/Promethea's own lust for knowledge prevails; she chooses the experience and they entwine. The panels are gorgeously disturbing in their depiction of the joining of Promethea's shining young flesh with that of Jack's aged, gnarled body; a somatic stitching that is monstrous, that is the "beast with two backs." When they come—together, perfectly—it is tantric, the most transcendent of *petite mort*, it is consensually pleasing for the characters, it is beautiful, yet it is monstrous for us to behold, horrible to see. We readers are forced, in our discomfort, to ask why this moment of magic and pleasure signifies as so radical, as so defiantly and disturbingly taboo. Why is loving the Other, crossing the boundary of individuated selfhood or stable subjectivity with the Other, taking the Other into oneself, so frightening? Perhaps because stable subjects are so readily ruled, so easily subjectified under layers of social order and hierarchical stratification. Sophie/Promethea joins with the sorcerer, taking him in body and soul, and in that unity, our protagonist becomes even more powerful as her knowledge grows. With Sophie/Promethea, we cross such borders, risking the censure of our socially-constructed selves as, panel by panel, we choose to know.

Because we are in eternity. We. Promethea, me, the author, H, you and you, whoever wants, whoever loves us, whoever loves. (Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*)

As Sophie/Promethea's journey continues, the boundaries between text and reader, as well as between writer, artist, text, and reader, begin to dissolve. This is depicted in panel and in word. Promethea many times looks at us directly, and as our communion with the scholar Sophie becomes more and more solidified, the instances of direct address to the reader become more frequent, until finally both word and image reflect the readers themselves. Towards the climactic close of the comic series, the character addresses the reader directly. "I'm an honest fiction," the character Promethea says, "I'm an honest fiction that can enter your dreams, possess her creators, talk through them to you" (vol. 5). Speaking to us in word, in image, and in mirror-image, Promethea looks at us, returning our readerly gaze as the text literally shows us ourselves, en-paneled. It is a striking, even shocking moment, to read a panel that depicts a reader-size thumb holding the self-same panel, *mise-en-abyme*.

Here the reading experience takes on frightening significance; it's as if the text sees us, is reading us: Promethea has escaped her bounds! But it gets worse: we encounter the writer. There's Alan Moore sitting in front of his computer looking at us, startled. And the artist, looking up from a panel, worried at what's going down. Our novels aren't supposed to break frame; a story is supposed to be contained, be it in sentences or panels and word-bubbles. Being forced to confront the unboundedness of the text is undoubtedly thrilling, if uncomfortable. It's odd, yet incredibly enticing, to be so understood.

At this moment of textual apocalypse, the ultimate destruction of the reader's sense of existing outside the world of the text, we become the story, and we are invited to delight in our unity.<sup>16</sup> It lasts only for a moment, as Cohen in his theorization of the monstrous cites Judith Butler, "this conceptual locus is 'a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects'" (20); we can't stay there, embodied in the text. The reader is not of Immateria, after all, one's material thumb is holding a material novel. And yet, there we are, depicted before our eyes, and made meaningful by our own readerly complicity. This peculiar and savvy moment of apocalypse, of destruction and deconstruction for the reader, occurs at the moment in the narrative when the alt-world of the text is also experiencing apocalypse, brought on by Promethea. For the characters of 1999 alt-NY, this is revealed to be more of an apotheosis, a cleansing, a righting of the act of signification; the implication being that it is so for us as well. Even as we reside in our material selves, it is imperative to remember the Immateria that Promethea has shown us within: the story of ourselves and of our immense and varied capacity for self-creation.

Promethea is the heroine of my life, of my imagination, of my book. I am her champion. I fight for her, to make her right—her reality, her presence, her grandeur—prevail. (Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*)

In asking us to confront this story, our own story, Alan Moore's *Promethea* is compositional *technê*, monstrous *epistêmê*, radical narratology. As meta-graphic-narrative par excellence, *Promethea* is at once a literacy lesson and a love letter to the comics, as well as a philosophical treatise on the status of creative and scholarly meaning at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this text we confront the face of monstrosity, and find it horrible and beautiful and uncannily familiar, since it is our own. A mirror we are forced as readers to hold up to ourselves, *Promethea* not only teaches us how to read the abject comic/graphic novel, it forces an epistemological shift in how we read ourselves as Other. *This* is "what happens when monstrosity is taken seriously, as a mode of cultural discourse" (Cohen viii): we have to look at ourselves, even we savvy cultural hunters, enlightened scholars, careful cullers of texts. What we see there—whether the face of God or the Gorgon—is left to each one of

us. Cohen's monsters "ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. . . they ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. . . they ask us why we have created them" (20). Promethea's monstrous invitation is just that dire, that direct. She calls us to remember our imagination, to revalue our own inner tuition, to abandon all boundaries, to dissolve categorization and read with *différance*, to embrace even monstrous illusion with compassion and understanding, at least for a blessed moment, and thus to know ourselves and the worlds we create and re-create, every day. At the moment of apotheosis, the enpaneled reader says to Promethea, "I thought I was somebody reading a comic book, or. . . No. That I was somebody **in** the book." Promethea replies, "You're everybody. That's how it **is** with stories. They're always really about **you**, aren't they?" (vol. 5).

Indeed, *Promethea* is a story about me, about you, and about us as literary scholars. This is a story in which a scholar transforms herself into story, into the multiplicity of Story. To read this text rigorously, as a literary scholar, is to contemplate the measure of our complicity not just within a particular moment of meaning construction in a particular text, but within our own larger stories, within the proscribed boundaries of our professional ways of knowing and of our ways of reading.<sup>17</sup> Whether we agree or not, part of Promethea's tutelage seems to be that even we scholars realize, perhaps intuitively,<sup>18</sup> that our daily endeavor—to fix, to locate, to examine, to classify—is but one small mode of the human activity of knowing. Yet we do it, and what else *can* we do? Willingly embrace a life of professional abjection? Even the stars in our midst have a difficult time of it, the gap between theory and practice. Never mind the marginalized feminists and/or twentieth-century deconstructionists, consider Ralph Waldo Emerson. Even he, the writer of "free shall the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom," had to make a living. A full century before the first etchings of the postmodern, Emerson was the writer who in his lecture to American scholars called for an end to their fascination with the dead, dusty past, urged the scholar to put fear "by his very function. . . behind him," to be not a rote "bookworm" but an active "Man Thinking" capable of reading and writing creatively enough to construct and to value "our own works." As Jean Ferguson Carr has pointed out in her introduction to his selected works in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, this is also the transcendentalist writer who earned his keep via the popular lecture circuit, and who afterwards, in rather striking opposition to his scholarly call to action against valorizing the literary past, quite literally is hung up as "representative m[a]n"<sup>19</sup> when he is trapped in image on schoolhouse walls and in word as "father of American literature": "Throughout the 19th century, Emerson's portrait gazed down from schoolhouse and library walls, where he was enshrined as one of America's great poets" (1704). To underscore the point, you have not missed, dear reader, that I have just presented "Emerson"

via his collected works in a popular anthology used to teach young scholars about the literary past.

In *Promethea*, Alan Moore has chosen to depict himself, both in image and in word. Enshrined as he is in the pages of this text, Moore invites our participation in the meta-fiction, and in so doing allows our contemplation of the larger meta-fiction of the construction of the scholarly self. Writer, artist, reader: by virtue of the medium itself we are forced to feel our movement and participation in the process of creation. We actively compose the story of the comic together, and in the infinite plurality of our dialogic imaginations, the story lives beyond any one conception, any one meaning. *Promethea*, as is Story itself, is monstrous in its multiplicities—untameable, without limit, ultimately unclassifiable or knowable in the traditional, scholarly ways of knowing. Perhaps, with the free and brave Moore, and with this uncommonly fearless comic/graphic novel, it may be that we scholars are willing witness-participants to a different mode of scholarly knowing, a kind of loving comprehension of the immensity of the monstrously Other-text that deconstructs any sure sense of closure or stable distinction between categories such as literary and pop, canon and non, novel and cartoon.

In our participation as readers and composers of this promethean narrative, perhaps, we engage in the reading and the writing and the loving of the body of the other, and in so doing we embrace it as our own, as ourselves. Perhaps in our dance with *Promethea*, in this magical and moving process we undertake when reading—and thus participating in the creation of—*Promethea*, we may even come close to a Cixousian *l'écriture féminine*—that notoriously elusive writing of the body of difference. Todd Comer and Joseph Sommers point to a potential reading of Moore's "revision of the superhero, and the politics of desire and violence grounded in ideologically-derived bodies," as *l'écriture féminine*, as "a body of writing which remains open and amorous" (10). As Showalter has it, "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text" (249). Let's face it, perhaps by design this is a concept we cannot fix, that defies definition, that we read via Cohen's notion of "process and movement" and/or other ways of knowing. Hélène Cixous writes: "woman<sup>20</sup> must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" ("Medusa" 875). *Promethea* certainly seems just this tale. Despite its author's gender, *Promethea* is this very imperative imagined in narrative form; this is many stories, and is primarily a story about a woman writing about women—not exclusively, but perhaps primarily. Sophie comes to know how dangerous that writing is, but also how powerful; she learns to write herself and becomes *Promethea*, the universal woman subject in all its multiplicities of expression, the latest version of the constantly-newly born woman, the medusa that transforms. In reading and loving Sophie/*Promethea*, reader, so have I, so will you—no matter the gender identities to which you lay claim, and/or fight.

Multiplicity of meanings; even embodied subjectivity as performance; this is the magic and mystery of *Promethea*.

That Moore presumably sees this story in word and image as magical balm for the human soul, may, it could be argued, point to the same old objectification of woman, to an essentializing glorification of the mother, or at best serve as a loving tribute from an always-already anxiously distanced son. But so what? It might be that, *and*. It might be all that with a difference, and it probably is. In its invitation to explore the unconscious; in its presentation of our guide to the immense beauty and terror of the “Immateria” of the human imagination as a mythical superheroine who, in reconstituting herself over and over again, transcends time and space; in its unabashed love of the Other, and of the Other that is the Self; in its explosion of the limits of narrative representation, and its call to apocalyptic revolution and rebirth, *Promethea* might be all that and is most certainly “moore.” But before too many limits are pushed, I will end, as I have begun, with the words of Cixous:

There have been poets who would go to any lengths to slip something by at odds with tradition—men capable of loving love and hence capable of loving others and of wanting them, of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence “impossible” subject, untenable in a real social framework. Such a woman the poet could desire only by breaking the codes that negate her. Her appearance would necessarily bring on, if not revolution—for the bastion was supposed to be immutable—at least harrowing explosions....But only the poets—not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffman would say, fairies. (“Medusa” 879-80)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Moore acknowledges Cixous’s *The Book of Promethea* in his own *Promethea*, explaining that he found her text during the process of composing the serial, an uncanny coincidence whose impact may certainly be traced through Moore’s comic. As is Cohen’s *Monster Theory*, Moore’s *Promethea* might be described as a loving tribute to the act of reading texts across all boundaries, disciplines, mediums, and timeframes.

<sup>2</sup> The witches’ chant, a curse of monstrous ambiguity that shapes the very first utterance of the previously dutiful and placid Macbeth; his first utterance is an immediate sign of his own internal equivocation, a slow awakening to imagination and to professional ambition (I.i.11, I.iii.39).

<sup>3</sup> “We have followed too much the devices and desire of our own hearts,” General Confession, *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*. In P. D. James’s *Devices and Desires*, 1990, the scholarly poet-detective Adam Dalgliesh, while out on the remote margins of the Norfolk coast, hunts a murderer, yet not the monstrous serial killer the reader first suspects.

<sup>4</sup> Including our complicity.

<sup>5</sup> McCloud's famous "Blood in the Gutter" (chapter 3): the reader must "see" blood in the gutter—the space between panels—to make sense of a murder, thus connecting fragments of meaning into a whole narrative. Readers of comics must use their imagination to enact closure; a lovely twentieth-century nod to eighteenth-century empiricist philosopher George Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in which he argues that there is no material reality, only ideas, and that cause and effect is a complete and necessary fabrication of the human mind. All is story, and we jump gutters constantly.

<sup>6</sup> A term with its own significant postmodernist history; for Derrida, the conditions necessary for the gift ensure it is "the very figure of the impossible" (*Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*). See also Scott's study of subjectivities in Cixous's *The Book of Promethea*, wherein she writes, "In fact, Hélène advocates a practice of spending wildly, going broke for the other, so to speak, without expecting anything in return" (31).

<sup>7</sup> *Time and Narrative*, the monumental, three-volume, late twentieth-century lit. crit. game-changer.

<sup>8</sup> Part of that history is the appearance of that character in comics, it should be noted.

<sup>9</sup> That the worded story is so clearly a device while the imaged story is presented as the main narrative content may suggest a Moorean privileging of image over word; yet as the story continues, the vibrancy of all signs seems to become the paramount point of the tale.

<sup>10</sup> Title of the first and last issues.

<sup>11</sup> All creatures experience the end of reality from this locus, no matter their geographic location, a clear reference to the significance for Moore of 9/11:

We all looked up to blinding spectacle, said holy this or holy that, so it was like the terrible blue day again, but night now, with two towering absences more visible, more heavy than the gone mere solids raised before, our captured rooks, when curling in on that same dreadful, beautiful elliptic, New York's gaudy hot-ass fabulous apocalyptic angel spirit, three years gone, entered again into her city, burger wraps and discount coupons spread like palm fronds at her feet that had a diamond sweat, a filth of powdered gold between the toes and everybody suddenly remembered that each brick, each busted tail-light in this mad stampede of world and time was Holy, to be loved, and there was no more and so on and so on, no more yadda yadda. (#28 / Collected Book 5)

<sup>12</sup> Weeping Gorilla over-dramatically revels in existential angst, rendering human suffering itself meaningless, a self-conscious joke that isn't funny. Stacia's scholarly interest in Weeping Gorilla—a signifying monkey who has lost even the tragedy of his own signification—seems a wry Moorean comment on the twentieth-century academy.

<sup>13</sup> Comics as modern-day myth; the savior of meaning in an over-signified, hyper-mediated, over-saturated world.

<sup>14</sup> Pace Cohen. Each *Promethea* is also depicted in the visual style appropriate to that particular cultural moment or medium. For an extensive exploration of Williams's art in *Promethea*, see Annalisa Di Liddo's *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps nothing new, just newly (en)gendered? Di Liddo argues that

*Promethea* is suggesting the same conception of imagination that Northrop Frye developed in his 1962 essay "The Imaginative and the Imaginary"—a force that can transform mankind because it can create "everything that we call culture and civilization" (Frye, *Fables*, 152). But the "maniac's anxiousness" (167) and the innovative language the artist uses to regenerate culture in Frye's belief correspond, in Moore's view, to the hybrid nature of comics. Through *Promethea*, comics reassert not only the central power of imagination, but also their own capacity to become a means for representing contemporary culture. (*Comics as Performance* 101)

<sup>16</sup> "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," *Song of Solomon* 6:3, perhaps the most well-loved of the Biblical wisdom literature.

<sup>17</sup> We help to write the story of inclusion, the story of canonicity, the story of professional advancement, of adjunctification, of institutionalized academic culture, of anarchy, whether we see ourselves doing so or not.

<sup>18</sup> Now there's a loaded term! From the *OED*—

Intuition: 1. The action of looking upon or into; contemplation; inspection; a sight or view. (= Latin *intuitus*.) 2. The action of mentally looking at; contemplation, consideration; perception, recognition; mental view. 3. The action of mentally looking to or regarding as a motive of action; ulterior view; regard, respect, reference. with intuition to (of), with reference to; in intuition to, in respect to, in view of, in consideration of. 4. *Scholastic Philos.* The spiritual perception or immediate knowledge, ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical. 5a. *Mod. Philos.* The immediate apprehension of an object by the mind without the intervention of any reasoning process; a particular act of such apprehension. 5b. Immediate apprehension by the intellect alone; a particular act of such apprehension. 5c. Immediate apprehension by sense; a particular act of such apprehension. 6. In a more general sense: Direct or immediate insight; an instance of this.

<sup>19</sup> Emerson's *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* is a collection of seven essays, published in 1850.

<sup>20</sup> Cixous writes: "When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (875).

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