"It's a Batman's World":
Regulations of Gender, Sanity, and Justice in Batman Comics, 1986-2011

Batman, or Bruce Wayne, is a famous DC Comics superhero without superpowers who fights crime at night in the guise of a bat after his parents' murder. He has starred in dozens of animated and live-action films and TV shows, graced YouTube with a fan-written musical, and been continuously published in comics since his first appearance in 1939. While many readers and viewers can likely recall iconic moments, such as *Batman: The Animated Series*' "I am vengeance! I am the night! I am Batman!"[1], it is less likely that they have considered the full weight of those words, and the institutions and infrastructures Batman has enacted and regulates in Gotham City.

In this thesis, I examine three modes through which Batman/Bruce Wayne exerts control over Gotham City: first, by performing and enforcing specific standards of masculine and heterosexual gender identity and sexual orientation; second, by hypocritically designing and implementing systems of regulation for the insane; and third, by challenging his system of justice and crime-fighting through the person and experiences of Jason Todd. This project is implicitly Foucauldian, and draws heavily from Michel Foucault's writings in *Madness and Civilization* and "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th Century Legal Psychiatry," as well as existing scholarship on masculinity and superhero comics, specifically those focusing on Batman.

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[1] Gilroy, Henry, et al. (Writer), and Kirkland, Boyd (Director). 15 Sept. 1992. "Nothing to Fear." In Bruce Timm (Producer), *Batman: The Animated Series.* USA: Warner Home Video, 2004.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

INTRODUCTION

I. Oh, So You Read Comics?

When people find out that I read comics, they tend to ask the same questions: Marvel or DC? (Neither — I prefer independent publishers such as Image and BOOM! Studios.) Have you read —? (Probably.) Favorite superhero? (Superman and Wonder Woman.)

That last one always gets a bit of pause, especially if my comics collection is within sight, dozens of Batman comics lined up with a damning neatness. "Really?" they ask. "You're not a Batman fan?" I laugh, try to shrug it off, and wonder how I'm going to get out of this conversation without either mortally offending the Bat-fan before me or lying to them. So I go for the path of least resistance: It's complicated.

I am not a "lifer" — someone who, in the comics subculture, has been reading comics as long as they can remember. I picked up *Batman: Year One* out of curiosity when I was nineteen, more interested in the city of Gotham than in its dark knight. By the time I looked up, I'd read more comics than I had space to store them, signed up for classes on comics history, and thoroughly bewildered

my parents. "I'll admit," my dad says whenever the subject comes up, "I did not

see the comics thing coming."

But what's the deal with Batman? It's...complicated. Am I a fan of Batman

comics, meaning those involving Gotham City and its citizens? Yes, absolutely;

they've given me a community of likeminded friends, characters who have in-

spired me, and narratives that I've clung to desperately, thinking that if Kate Kane

can move past her expulsion from the military, and if Barbara Gordon can recover

from her personal tragedies to become one of the most powerful people in the DC

universe, then surely I can overcome whatever faces me at the moment.

Am I a fan of Batman himself? Bruce Wayne? His particular philosophies

and brand of paranoid vigilantism? How his narratives are structured in ways that

privilege specific, constrictive ideals of personhood? No. Not at all. I could —

and, in fan spaces, have — go on for a couple pages outlining why I find Batman

such a frustrating character, but I'll let Matt Fraction, Eisner-award winning

writer of *Hawkeye, Sex Criminals,* and *ODY-C*, sum it up:

> The older you get, the more you live in the world, it's impossible
> not to look at Batman through class and race. Batman is a rich
> white billionaire who beats up poor brown people and mentally ill
> people. That's weird, right? Kinda weird. A billionaire, punching
> poor people.

This is about the point where, if I've elected to be honest about my thoughts on

Batman, the Bat-fan in question either looks at me in undisguised horror because

I've ruined their childhood idol, or tells me that I'm taking the character too seri-

ously, or concludes that I'm not taking the character seriously *enough*. The words "fake geek girl" get thrown around. One or both of us storms off angrily.

Here's the thing about Batman: I *do* take him seriously, in a way that prevents me from appreciating or liking him as a character. I have a lot of faith in the power of narratives, and I believe that the stories we tell, the characters we idolize, can have an enormous impact on the audience. It troubles me that Batman, being such a popular cultural icon, is a character who does not target institutional inequities but reinforces them with the might of his own privilege; who fights crime through fear and violence rather than social reform; and who uses orphaned and abandoned children as foot soldiers in his personal crusade. I expect heroes to be held to a higher standard — to be heroic.

II. "I Shall Become a Bat": A Brief Overview of the Batman

Not everyone knows who Wally West or Martian Manhunter is, though like Batman, both are members of the Justice League, but everyone recognizes the Bat-symbol. Everyone knows it belongs to the Batman, and a lot of people can sing the 1960s theme song, or understand the narrative fallacy of the utility belt, or have rolled their eyes at Robin's scaly green underpants. For more than seventy-five years, the character has endured in comics, television, animation, and film, attaining a popularity nearly unparalleled in the genre of superheroes.

Batman/Bruce Wayne was created in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger,

which is to say that Bob Kane decreed the name and got all the credit and copy-

rights, and Bill Finger did everything else for next to nothing. Batman first ap-

peared in *Detective Comics* #27, and his origin story was first depicted in #33.

The stories in which he features are widely regarded as being edgier, more acces-

sible, and more psychologically complex than anything else the comics industry

has put forth — largely due to the simplicity of his origin story.

The details vary: some write the Wayne family walking home from the

theater, some from the movies, and some don't bother to account for their activi-

ties either way. In any case, Thomas, Martha, and Bruce Wayne are on their way

home, taking a shortcut through Crime Alley, when they are accosted by a mug-

ger. We have come to know him as Joe Chill. The Waynes hand over their wallets

readily enough, but Chill demands the pearls around Martha's neck as well. A

sudden move is made, or Chill's desperation causes him to be careless with his

gun; in any case, two shots are fired, and young Bruce Wayne is left alone in the

night on the bloodstained street, vowing to eradicate the evil that stole his parents

from him.

As we know, he decides that the best way to honor this vow is to don the

guise of a flying rodent and fight crime with adolescent sidekicks.

It is at this point in the narrative that I throw up my hands for the first

time. It is unquestionably terrible that Bruce was orphaned so violently and so

young, but his vow — which for all intents and purposes is set in stone, inalter-

able and unchanging — is frustrating. Young Bruce wants to stop everyone else from being murdered, from having their lives broken by violence; effectively, he wants to be the hero, the savior that he needed on that cold night. But he never stops to consider, not even as an adult, what kind of saving Joe Chill needed to keep him from that path, and so he never tries to be *that* hero. His vigilantism, then, is inherently self-oriented, making no allowance for the experiences and needs of others.

One might ask why I return to Batman in spite of my frustrations with him — why my collection of Gotham-based titles outstrips those of Superman or Wonder Woman or any of the other characters I prefer over Bruce Wayne. I counter that I do not return *in spite* of my frustrations, but *because* of them: I don't understand the popularity of the character or his mythology, given the former's unheroic nature and the latter's fundamentally flawed construction, and so I spend a great deal of time attempting to understand both. The fact that the mythos is so flawed inspires me to analyze it, to break it apart and reassemble it in hopes of extracting from it some kind of cultural meaning. Reading Batman comics doesn't automatically mean that I spend my comics time with Bruce Wayne, as it is actually quite easy to read any number of Batman titles without stumbling across him at all, and there are many other characters I love in this sustained narrative. And, in spite of myself, I do love Gotham City and its assorted citizens; I love what they have given me in fiction, academia, and fandom community. I en-

gage with the Batman mythos critically, even scathingly, because I love it, and I want it to have meaning for everyone.

III. Comics Scholarship and Bat-academia

After decades of dismissing comics as a medium, academia began to pay it critical attention in the mid-1980s — in 1986, to be precise. To say that 1986 was a landmark year in comics is to state the obvious. Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen,* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* were all published at the end of 1985 or during 1986, and affected the world of comics in a significant way. In short, each work signaled to the broader literary and cultural circles that comics were now serious, worthy of sustained analysis, and not suitable for children; in other words, that they had "grown up." The term "graphic novel" was employed quite heavily during this time.

Comics studies is still a relatively new and growing discipline. Most scholarship tends to focus on graphic memoirs, in an ongoing effort to distance the field from the association with less serious superhero comics. What criticism does engage with superhero comics tends to focus on comics published in the late 1980s: *Watchmen, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), and *Batman: Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989). Alternatively, or in conjunction with these analyses, scholarship focusing on Batman engages in a decades-old debate about Batman's sexuality,

which I will address shortly.

By far the most prominent figure in Batman scholarship is Will Brooker, whose books *Batman Unmasked* (2001) and *Hunting the Dark Knight* (2012) provide essential cultural criticism spanning from Batman's 1939 inception to the early years of the twenty-first century. Most helpfully, Brooker investigates the fraught question of authorship in comics. Authorship in comics is especially complex, both in that any given comic has several authors — such as the writer, the penciller, the inker, the colorist, and the letterer, not to mention the editor in the case of superhero comics — and that, accordingly, any given superhero character has dozens if not hundreds of "canon," or official, authors, and hundreds more "fanon," or fandom-centered authors producing transformative works based on that character and their universe.

Critically, I owe a great debt to Brooker's scholarship, as well as to Geoff Klock's essay, "The Revisionary Superhero Narrative." Essays by Leslie J. Anderson, Lucy Rollin, Marc Singer, and James F. Wurtz on *Arkham Asylum* have been particularly useful in my second chapter, which focuses on that comic. Paul Petrovic's article on panel structure and queerness in *Batwoman: Elegy* provides a wonderful structural and character analysis which I have employed in my first chapter, along with Staci Strobl's and Nickie D. Philips' superb chapter on gender in superhero comics, and Jenée Wilde's articulation of the tension between Batman's masculinity and his sexuality.

IV. The Elephant in the Batcave

Since a major feature of academic inquiry into Batman focuses on the question of his sexuality, it is necessary to foreground my thesis with the history of the gay Batman debate and my frustrations with it. While suspicions of homoeroticism in Batman precede Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham's well-publicized recognition that such possibilities existed in Batman comics remains the most notorious and contested reading of Batman.

Essentially, Wertham suggested, based on the interpretations of his psychiatric patients (many of whom likely would, in a modern context, identify as queer), the relationship between Batman and Robin (typically Dick Grayson) erred suspiciously on the queer end of the sexual spectrum. As Brooker documents in *Batman Unmasked,* the reactions to Wertham's book were — and to some degree remain — overwhelmingly negative, eliciting accusations of homophobia and bigotry on Wertham's part for documenting the queer readings of his psychiatric patients, and for simply seeing what was implicit in comics of the 1950s. Andy Medhurst's 1991 essay, "Batman, Deviance, and Camp," concisely exemplifies the attitudes engendering that response, while Brooker's chapter elegantly contextualizes and counters Medhurst's indignation, advocating a more measured and historicized approach to Wertham's claims based on actual comics of the 1950s and a closer reading of Wertham's analysis as sympathetic.

However, the proverbial elephant in the Batcave endured long after

Wertham's book and the ensuing Comics Code Authority in fan discourse, comics subtext, and academic speculation. Gareth Schott's essay on the sexual identity of superheroes suggests that, as an archetype, the superhero is particularly susceptible to such readings, as his sexuality "has largely been instituted and constructed through fan interventions that effectively complete a 'coming out' narrative first implied by the text" (Schott 21), and Batman's own multiple performances of identity certainly adhere to the model Schott advances. Jenée Wilde, in her essay "Queer Matters in *The Dark Knight Returns,*" argues that investigating the cultural obsession with Batman's heterosexuality is more fruitful than the sexuality itself:

> ...the gay Batman debate itself appears to be symptomatic of a much greater and more deeply divisive issue: the dialectical tensions in our culture between normative heterosexuality and its perceived antithesis, homosexuality. Batman, as a cultural icon, carries perceived notions of masculinity that are seen (by some) to be at odds with his ambiguous sexuality; in other words, Batman cannot both be a "real" man and a "gay" man. (Wilde 111)

In my first chapter, I apply Wilde's argument in my own analysis of Batman's conflicting portrayals of masculinity, but for now, I will briefly explain my own reservations about the debate surrounding Batman's "ambiguous sexuality."

I admit that efforts to read Batman as a queer individual frustrate me for a number of reasons, not the least of which is my own identity and experiences as a bisexual woman. However, it is important to clarify that my frustrations are with the ways in which these readings have been carried out, and not that they exist in

the first place. First, all such readings, to my knowledge, identify the queer tensions primarily in the relationship with Robin (usually Dick Grayson, which further sidelines queer readings of Jason Todd). In the 1986-2011 continuity, which is the focus of my own research and analysis, Robin is always a child in a position of severe dependence on and, one could argue, given the violence in which they participate, a condition of being abused by Batman. Such homoerotic readings, then, are tantamount to suggesting that Batman is a pedophile, and all but confirm the worst assumptions of homophobic campaigns in the real world. Second, all discourse (again, to my knowledge) on the potentiality of Batman's queerness assumes he is either homosexual or heterosexual; a broader spectrum of possibility is more or less completely ignored, contributing to the erasure of more fluid sexual orientations. Third, I am concerned that the focus on questions of Batman's sexuality may cause readers to overlook the misogyny engendering the moments when homosociality shifts towards homosexuality, not to mention the attitudes that allow women to be deployed as "no homo" plot devices, as in the case of the original Kate Kane,[1] and of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns.* As observed by Geoff Klock, *The Dark Knight Returns* is incredibly misogynistic, even as it attempts to subvert accusations of homoeroticism by making Robin a young girl, and displaces homoeroticism into the interactions between Batman and his adver-

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[1] Originally introduced as Kathy Kane/Batwoman, she was conceived as a love interest for Batman in the *Seduction of the Innocent* aftermath, much as her niece, Bette Kane, was written as a love interest for Robin ("Kathy Kane").

saries, Two-Face, the Joker, and, in this case, Superman (121-122).

Fourth, DC Comics/Warner Bros., which own the Batman copyright, will never canonically queer Batman. It will not happen. Speculation of a contemporary Batman's sexuality, then, does little more than highlight instances, to borrow from fandom terminology, of "queer baiting." Queer baiting, as defined in fandom, is

> the perceived attempt by canon creators [...] to woo queer fans by introducing a character whose sexuality seems, early on, to be coded as something other than one hundred percent heterosexual [...] [only to] retreat from that early perceived notion of queer inclusion, and clearly [mark] the sexually ambiguous character as straight. ("Queer Baiting")

As Nathan G. Tipton suggests, any queer subtext in the original incarnation of Batman was clearly unintentional (326). However, later subtext is likely not an accident; as Will Brooker notes, though reminding the reader of Bob Kane's general unreliability, Kane began to incorporate queer innuendoes into his comics after *Seduction of the Innocent* was published (152, 179n). While I doubt that editorial policy at DC Comics explicitly condones the inclusion of queer subtext, or has any intention of ever condoning any queer readings of Batman, such subtext abounds in even the most aggressively heterosexual iterations of Batman (Frank Miller's, for example), and in such cases constitutes a particularly uncomfortable iteration of queer baiting.

V. Arguing Batman

The scope of my analyses is both more specific and much broader than most scholarship on Batman, and rooted in literary traditions of close reading rather than sociological analysis. I focus on a single period of continuity, and assume continuity within this period: that of 1986-2011, also known as the Post-Crisis or "preboot" period, referring to the "Crisis on Infinite Earths" event of 1985 and the "New 52" reboot of 2011. Nothing in or prior to "Crisis" or during the New 52 applies to this period: it is a contained, complete narrative arc reimagining the decades-old characters for the modern age, and is, as such, very well suited to a sustained analysis.

I have elected to limit my close readings to specific texts of the Bat-canon, and to refrain from a sustained analysis of character development from, for example, the Batman of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* to that of Grant Morrison's *Batman, Inc.,* series. I have also decided to engage selectively with the comics published between 1986 and 2011 — that is, to overlook or disregard inconsistencies in portrayal in pursuit of the truest characterization whenever possible. Negotiating decades of comics in pursuit of such characterization is a challenge, as it requires both the assumption of faithful continuity and the willingness to discard some interpretations in favor of others. For example, I assume that the Batman articulated by Miller in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is the same Batman in *Batman: Year One, Gotham Central,* and *Batwoman: Elegy.* Likewise,

I assume that Miller's characterization of Jim Gordon in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), as a grim, pessimistic misogynist, should be set aside in favor of the Gordon articulated in *Batman: Year One* (1987), whose determined stability is largely sustained throughout succeeding comics.

My approach in this thesis is also predicated upon the recognition and negotiation of a narrative tension inherent to Batman comics. *The Dark Knight Returns* has had as lasting an influence within the genre of superhero comics — and especially Batman comics — as it and its critically recognized peers had upon the public perception of the comics medium. As Geoff Klock argues, *The Dark Knight Returns* imposes a pervasive, grim realism upon Gotham and the Batman (118), the degree of which had not been realized prior to Miller's work but which persisted beyond his direct involvement with the character.[2] Such a severe imposition of realism works to great effect in *The Dark Knight Returns,* as a single, self-contained, and hypothetical chapter in the Batman mythos, but is less successful when sustained over a period of more than twenty years, or even into distinct narratives conceived immediately after *The Dark Knight Returns.* Miller also wrote *Batman: Year One*, originally published in 1987, with the same dedication to realism but with less success. In artist David Mazzucchelli's faithful reproduction of 1980s New York City, Bruce Wayne's decision to "become a bat" (22) seems less

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[2] In fandom, the style of *The Dark Knight Returns* and similar works is known as "grim-dark."

a mythic echo of *Detective Comics* #33, which featured the first incarnation of the iconic origin story, than it does simply bizarre, or even laughable.

The superhero genre, almost literally by design when one considers the varied impracticalities of superhero costumes, demands from the reader a suspension of disbelief because it is inherently absurd. As my thesis, and the ever-growing scholarship on superhero comics, argue, the genre in and of itself is still worthy of academic attention. Much as Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester argue in the introduction to *The Superhero Reader,* it is quite possible for the superhero genre to have absurd qualities *and* to be "taken seriously."

In relation to the grim realism attempted post-Miller, this thesis is predicated upon the assumption of an inherent absurdity of superhero comics. When this absurdity is put in conflict with this realism, the tension creates a fundamental instability in the modern iterations of the genre, especially when said realism is imposed over a sustained period of time and set of narratives, as is the case with post-Miller (1987-2011) Batman comics. Therefore, the task of analyzing Batman and his principles is complex. Steve Brie, quoting longtime Batman editor Dennis O'Neil, observes that,

> within the pantheon of comic-book heroes, Batman, because of [his] close relationship with the conventions of realism, has become the most recognisably human and therefore the most open to moral and ethical interrogation[;] it has become academically acceptable to "treat him as if he were real"... (Brie 204)

While I understand the reasoning behind this tendency, I believe it exacerbates the

instability of the Batman narratives. One simply cannot hold Batman to realist standards of justice, vigilantism, or gravity: he defies all those and more with the same surly determination and innumerable gadgets in the utility belt. Accordingly, what follows in this thesis is not an attempt to impose real-world standards to Batman's actions (or lack thereof), but rather an effort to examine his fallibilities within the context of the destabilized fiction of Gotham City.

VI. "It's a Batman's World"

My argument, sustained through each chapter, is that Batman acts less as an individual than as an institution in Gotham City; that is, that his actions are not constrained to his individual responsibility, but have lasting regulatory influences on the city, establishing a normality of deviance that Batman performs himself and polices in others. Essentially, Batman determines correct and incorrect forms of behavior — of gender performance, of mental health, and of justice — and actively regulates those forms, either by personally incarcerating those who defy him or by enforcing systems of thought that support, or at least do not interfere with, his own beliefs. Furthermore, the narrative conditions us to believe Batman, or at least to be sympathetic to him: he is the lens through which our experiences are filtered, and the narrative refuses to ever let Batman be wrong, to make a mistake, accordingly reinforcing his beliefs and actions on a meta-narrative level.

The arguments I make in the following chapters draw directly from specif-

ic comics that are considered historically significant, or critically outstanding, or immensely popular in fandom. None of these categories overlap in the comics I have selected, save perhaps in the case of *Batwoman: Elegy*, but each comic is treated here with the same attention and interest. More broadly, I have drawn from three major areas of scholarship: that regarding masculinity, and Yvonne Tasker's related theory of musculinity; that of insanity, following Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*; and that of criminality, borrowing again from Foucault's "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry."

I have structured the analysis of each of my chapters distinctly, as an experiment in approaching superhero comics. My first chapter identifies a theme in the "Bat-mythos" and examines its construction and criticism in four different characters, across three different comics. My second chapter focuses very specifically on a single comic and provides a close analysis of its themes as they may apply to the mythos. My final chapter focuses on a single character, whose narrative comprises dozens of comics, and the critique he embodies of the Bat-mythos. In short, my analyses are, respectively, grounded in a broad construct applied to the 1986-2011 continuity as a whole; focused more traditionally on a single chapter of the continuity; and based on a character in relation to the mythos. Neither approach is more valid than another, as all are useful ways in which to examine comics sharing a universe or authorship, and are precedented in both comics

scholarship and literary analysis.

The first chapter examines the constructs of masculinity in Gotham City, as it is normalized by Detective Jim Gordon, and glorified by Bruce Wayne/Batman, in *Batman: Year One*, using historical analyses by Guy Reel and Gerda W. Ray on idealized masculinities in police forces and detective fiction as context. Having established specific constructs of masculinity, I then examine their effect upon Detective Renee Montoya, a lesbian officer in the Gotham City Police Department, and upon Kate Kane/Batwoman, a lesbian who turns to vigilante crime fighting after being separated from the military under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Where Gordon and Batman are both able to benefit from the masculinities they perform, Renee is first trapped and then abandoned by them, and Kate is only able to achieve success in her life, fulfillment in her dedication to serve her community, and peace in her own identity by ignoring them entirely.

My second chapter reads vision and madness in *Arkham Asylum,* arguing that the comic itself argues that Batman is insane, in startling defiance of the editorial policy of the era as documented by Brooker in *Batman Unmasked*. This policy, drafted by Dennis O'Neil and known as the Bat-Bible, outlines out the basic details of Batman necessary to any creator responsible for the character, establishing first that Batman is not insane, nor does he kill. Accordingly, I argue that Grant Morrison's and Dave McKean's Batman, depicted as mentally disabled and ethically deviant as the rogues he imprisons, destabilizes the construction of crim-

inality and mental illness in Gotham City, which otherwise equates the two.

The third chapter turns to Jason Todd, the short-lived second Robin who, after being resurrected, imposes a scathing critique of Batman's methods, focusing especially on the ways in which Batman's system of justice and punishment fails. As there is practically no existing scholarship on Jason, I engage with a fan-generated essay on Jason's character development, and use its argument regarding Jason's history of trauma to further my own analysis of the challenge Jason poses to Batman. I contextualize my arguments with Foucault's essay on the "Dangerous Individual," which suggests that systems of criminal justice first equate the crime with the individual who committed it, and second demand intimate knowledge of this individual in order to punish them. Each of these principles is employed by Batman in his own system, and critiqued by Jason Todd in the narratives upon which I focus. While Jason's critique is ultimately unsuccessful, I argue that it is significant in that it was allowed to happen at all, in a mythos which otherwise privileges the moral certainty of Batman above all others.

I close with a brief coda, which focuses on *Batman: The Black Mirror,* a story arc comprising the final issues of *Detective Comics* published before the New 52 reboot. Though Batman is the main character of the story, it is Dick Grayson, not Bruce Wayne, who wears the cowl. Accordingly, I investigate the ways in which Grayson does or does not address the institutional representations of gender, sanity, and justice enacted by his predecessor, leaving the figure of the

Batman uncertainly destabilized in Gotham City, stranded uncomfortably between correct and incorrect masculinities, sanity and madness, justice and injustice.

CHAPTER ONE:
"Any more of your deviant behavior": Masculinity in Gotham City

In the introduction to *Spectacular Bodies* (1991), a book examining gender politics in 1980s action cinema, Yvonne Tasker references "comic-strip traditions which deal in parodic, exaggerated characteristics of gender identity" (14). It is very easy to dismiss gender dynamics in superhero comics with that perspective, especially given comics of the 1980s and earlier. Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl's essay, "'Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl': Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Comic Book Justice," offers a similar, though more measured, analysis: "To fight crime, male heroes are expected to *look* heroic, to maintain a hypermasculine physique, and to 'do crime fighting' in a gendered way that privileges heterosexuality" (152). As Phillips and Strobl argue, however, "[performances of gender] reflect or challenge" this construction of hegemonic masculinity (148).

In this chapter, I propose to extend and complicate Phillips' and Strobl's arguments by applying them to select Batman comics between 1986-2011 which construct and challenge the mythos' hegemonic masculinities. I will do so through

the examination of specific manifestations of gender performance and sexuality in four characters: Jim Gordon, an officer in the Gotham City Police Department, who establishes a normalized masculinity; Bruce Wayne/Batman, who enforces and idealizes multiple conflicting masculinities; Renee Montoya, a lesbian GCPD detective outed to the precinct who unsuccessfully challenges the masculinities that other her; and Kate Kane/Batwoman, an ex-military lesbian who is able to escape the constraints of the military and vigilante practices in pursuit of her own identity. The central goal of this chapter is to investigate the tensions arising between institutional expectations of gender and sexuality as they construct masculinity, and individual performances of both, and to analyze how such tensions are and are not perpetuated by the Batman. As my thesis holistically examines modes through which Batman exerts control over Gotham City, I argue here that masculinity is pervasively, albeit not absolutely, articulated in ways that reflect metatextual hegemonic masculinities. Under the masculinity idealized and enforced by Batman, men and women are alike constricted into rigidly defined ideals of sexual orientation and gender performance.

I. "How did you like my performance?": The Multiple Masculinities of Gotham City

While the majority of scholarship on Frank Miller's hypermasculine Batman has focused on *The Dark Knight Returns,* my analysis here will draw princi-

pally on his subsequent series, collected as *Batman: Year One.*[1] *Year One* is the

beginning for the 1986-2011 continuity, and most succeeding works draw heavily

upon both its plot and its characterization.[2] It also serves to establish the character

of Jim Gordon as a stable figure within the Bat-mythos — one who consistently

does the right thing, who strives to uphold the letter of the law, and who embodies

a kind of correct masculinity. Gordon, best known as GCPD Commissioner Gor-

don, was the first supporting character introduced to the Batman cast (in 1939's

Detective Comics #27), and has remained an officer of the law who aids and lends

an air of legitimacy to Batman's vigilantism in the seventy-six ensuing years

("James Gordon").

The basic plot of *Year One* follows both Batman/Bruce Wayne and Jim

Gordon as they re-/enter Gotham City. Wayne is determined to put his years of

newly completed training to good, if curiously specific, use as a vigilante; Gordon

is desperate to protect his pregnant wife and future son from one of the most

crime-ridden cities in the DC universe. While Wayne's obstacles are more per-

sonal — determining who he is and how to establish his identity in the wake of

his childhood trauma — Gordon's are more concrete: the corrupt Commissioner

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[1] I do so because, while *The Dark Knight Returns* is considered one of the most influential comics ever written, it is not, in the strictest sense, canon; it represents a possible future, a potential end point.

[2] In an interview with Comics Alliance, Ed Brubaker stated that his graphic novel, *The Man Who Laughs* (2008) was an effort to "create a bridge between *Year One* and *The Killing Joke.*" Such efforts are far from uncommon; Jeph Loeb's and Tim Sale's *The Long Halloween* (1996) also draws heavily upon the mob politics established in *Year One.*

Loeb, Lieutenant Flass and his cronies. Accordingly, Gordon is able to achieve a state of relative masculine stability by the narrative's end — one which is maintained throughout the successive decades of Batman comics — while Wayne has no such success. Instead, he is forced by the unending serialization of comics, and his own status as a corporate entity, to remain perpetually unresolved.

As with many of the central themes of Batman comics, I believe that the masculinities represented by Gordon and others in *Batman: Year One* are derived principally from nineteenth century Anglo-American sensibilities. Writer Frank Miller and artist David Mazzucchelli's[3] focus on the body, physical and mental abilities, socioeconomic classes, and individualism as key elements of masculinity seems drawn specifically from the gendered anxieties most present in late nineteenth and early twentieth century press. As identified by Guy Reel's excellent analysis, this press privileged a single "correct," over myriad "incorrect," performance of masculinity. At the turn of the century, police — and the narratives constructed around them in journalism or fiction — acted as "both barometers and guardians of types of masculinities because they were thrust into the roles often traditionally reserved for men (or at least the ideals for men) — heroes, protectors, crime fighters and solvers, and peacemakers" (Reel 184).[4] Accordingly,

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[3] Without access to the original script, it is impossible to know who made the decision to render certain characters as deviations from standards of masculine bodies.

[4] Notably, these police narratives were largely written about and for white, heterosexual, working- and middle-class men, and often men who were immigrants (Reel 182). While police at the time were dominated by Irish Americans, the above description fits the early comics creators perfectly in all but nationality (most, if not all, were Jewish by way of Eastern Europe [Fingeroth 9]).

ideals of physical and mental ability and stability were projected upon them; po-

lice were, after all, the first line of defense against the "deviant underclass, which

included criminals, sports, loose women, brawlers, and drunks" (184), and the

standard against which the deviant underclass was measured and found wanting.

The masculinities encoded in the institution of the police reinforced the hegemon-

ic masculinities of the day: the new ideal of men were "powerful and manly [and]

aggressive champions of 'right' behavior" (182), akin to the sportsmen and fight-

ers whose figures would later inspire the physiques of characters like Superman

and Batman (Jones 69-70). This "'right' behavior" included, of course, protecting

those who needed protection, but also the authority, rooted in hegemonic mas-

culinity, by which a man, police or not, protected at all:

> [Newspapers of the day] advocated for tough, disciplined men who
> were not afraid of violence and who could dispense appropriate
> justice through either brute force or superior intellect. This was the
> new self-made man at the turn of the century — the man who
> could respond to threats to his dominance in an effective, aggres-
> sive way. (Reel 190)

Reel documents a shift from police defining ideals of masculinity, to other, non-

police men adhering to specific masculine ideals also gaining access to that spe-

cific hegemonic masculine authority. Crime journalists aiding the police were thus

able to gain masculine cachet, but so were those acting as vigilantes — like Bat-

man. Thus, within the context of police and detective fictions, which heavily in-

form "many of today's media frames" (Reel 198) (including the Bat-mythos), we

may discern correct and incorrect performances of "[dominance], …[aggression], [and] manliness" (181) in the representatives afforded us in *Year One.*

The primary institution to which we are admitted in *Year One* is that of the Gotham Central Police Department (GCPD), which, we are made to understand, cultivates a corrupt, immoral, and violent masculinity in its officers — specifically, Lieutenant Flass, who acts as Gordon's masculine foil throughout *Year One*. From the beginning, we are positioned to view Gordon sympathetically, especially in contrast to Flass: he demonstrates concern for his pregnant wife (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 2.2, 3.1), and distaste for Flass's casual violence against a weaker civilian and his smug declaration that "Cops got it *made* in *Gotham*" (3.2-3.3). Here, Mazzucchelli ably communicates the dichotomy between Flass and Gordon: Flass looms hugely over Gordon and a book-peddler both, right hand stretched almost casually around the latter's throat, and then slung amiably over Gordon's shoulder in the next panel. Gordon looks back towards the injured peddler as Flass leads him away, reinforcing Miller's earlier establishment of his protective nature, while Flass has likely already forgotten about the peddler, the violence not even having registered to him as he smiles off beyond the borders of the page, secure in his own power (Fig. 1). By contrast, Gordon looks grim, cautious, concerned, well-built but not to Flass' hyperbolic musculature, wearing a pair of non-threatening, unassuming glasses. While it's later made clear (both visually and textually) that Gordon is Flass' physical match, able to handily defeat him in

a fight, artist David Mazzucchelli here depicts Gordon dwarfed by Flass, encum-

bered by the suitcase that appears almost as big as him. In fact, he looks to physi-

cally match the "skinhead" Flass so casually shoves away more than he does

Flass. Later depictions of Gordon reveal him to be of average height and build,

making Flass' large stature somewhat unnatural by comparison.

Fig. 1: Flass and Gordon in *Batman: Year One*

There is nothing particularly remarkable about Gordon's appearance, nothing to

distinguish him (unlike Bruce Wayne's Gregory Peck-good looks[5]) from anyone

else in Gotham City. If Gordon is, as I argue, the figure of normative masculinity

in Gotham, then normative masculinity is necessarily white and able-bodied, het-

erosexual, and physically capable of aggression, but aesthetically unexceptional.

Throughout *Year One,* Flass acts as a deliberate negative to Gordon's more

accessible moral stability. Gordon frets about his ability to protect and provide for

his wife and future child; Flass implicitly threatens their wellbeing (and, later, car-

[5] Artist David Mazzucchelli cites Gregory Peck as a reference in his own character design of
Bruce Wayne (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis "Afterwords" n.p.)

ries out these threats) in an attempt to intimidate Gordon. Gordon strives to cleanse his department of corruption and bribery; Flass reports this offense to his equally corrupt superior, Commissioner Loeb, and unflinchingly executes the brutal punishment ordered against Gordon. Gordon acts in heteronormative ways, having two long term relationships with women — his marriage with his wife, which chains him to his job, and his affair with Detective Sarah Essen, the lone female GCPD officer, which is used to threaten him by the sexually unmoored Flass. Against all of Flass' many moral and legal failings, and in spite of Gordon's adultery, Gordon is defaulted as the representative of correct masculinity: he is honest, he avoids excess violence (indeed, he only really employs violence to protect his wife and son), he works against corruption, and he strives to execute justice in one of the most dangerous cities in DC Comics' America.

The dichotomy between Flass and Gordon reflects the legacy of the role of masculinities within nineteenth century police forces in New York City. As Guy Reel describes it, "Police became, in a sub-textual way, both barometers and guardians of types of masculinities [...representative of] the ideals for men" (184). Men — and especially police officers, as they became figures of some celebrity and notoriety in the press of the day — were meant to protect those weaker than themselves (their families, as Gordon does when he retaliates against Flass), to seek deescalation before violence (as Gordon does when entering a hostage situation), and to uphold the law: to be "bold, brave, aggressive, and

sensible," rather than "abus[ive of] their power…drunk on the job, or [guilty of harassing] women." In police narratives of the nineteenth century, such abuses constituted a "wrongful [assertion] of…power[, which amounted] to a criticism of these officers as men" (187-188, 196) (Miller, Mazzcucchelli, and Lewis 18-19, 28). Under these criteria, Flass himself performs incorrect masculinity (for which the text punishes him), while Gordon's performance of correct, righteous masculinity — one that is authorized by existing power structures, participates in heteronormative family structure, and uses violence judiciously — is rewarded by the approbation of *Year One's* creators and audience. In the final panel, it's Gordon who smiles beyond the stark black border, seemingly satisfied with his present and future (96.5) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Gordon at the close of *Year One*

The dubious reward of a surreptitious alliance with Batman, however, is what shifts Gordon from a figure of strictly correct masculinity to one of limited stability and correctness. His willingness to collaborate with a costumed vigilante, whose activities, under strict scrutiny, are illegal, destabilizes the equilibrium his conflict with the corrupt GCPD had established, and imposes a kind of duplicity on Gordon's own identity. He is, theoretically, more effective in Gotham with the Batman's aid, but accepting that aid necessarily condones Batman's more violent

and suspicious methods, and implicates Gordon in the host of crimes with which

Batman could be (and, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, is[6]) charged. Therefore, I

propose that Gordon operates as a point of stability *only* within the confines of

Gotham City, and only a Gotham destabilized by the existence of the Batman.

Removed from the inherently abnormal reality the Batman has established, Gor-

don's willingness to collaborate with a violent vigilante makes him an untrustwor-

thy, unstable figure unable to perform the correct masculinities of a morally and

professionally sound police officer. Within this reality, however, he functions as

the stable moral center of Gotham City, who legitimizes Batman's presence

through his representation of law and order.

While Gordon's masculinity is established through contrast with his narra-

tive foil, Detective Flass, no such foil exists for *Year One*'s Bruce Wayne/Batman.

Though his narrative is carefully contrasted with Gordon's, his masculinity is not

— except in that we are meant, through association with Gordon's correct morali-

ty, to find Batman's motivations similarly acceptable. They share compatible

goals: to combat crime and corruption in Gotham City and to protect its inhabi-

tants. But while Gordon's thoroughly working-class employment acts as a limit-

ing force in the masculinities he is allowed to display (and the modes of justice he

is permitted to pursue), Batman as Bruce Wayne possesses an incomparably vast

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[6] New GCPD Commissioner Ellen Yindel describes Batman's "actions [as] categorically *criminal*," and issues an "*arrest warrant* for the Batman on charges of *assault, breaking and enter-ing,* [and] *creating a public hazard*" (Miller, Janson, and Varley 72.10-11), and later adds "*child endangerment*" to the roster (138.8).

fortune — to which he has not contributed — and a castle-like manor "[b]uilt as a fortress, generations past, to protect a fading line of royalty from an age of Equals" (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 4.6). Accordingly, the masculinities available to him are seemingly endless, and endlessly conflicting, without any real resolution to the question of whether or not his pursuit of these masculinities can be considered "correct."

As I demonstrated in my introduction, discussion of Batman's sexuality has been unbalanced by debates over his queerness. Here, I will take a different approach, and argue for his myriad and conflicting masculinities. Jenée Wilde, in her essay on queer readings of Batman, astutely identifies the homophobic attitude of both fans and creators suggesting that "Batman cannot both be a 'real' man and a 'gay' man" (111) due to the hegemonic masculinities he embodies (or is perceived to embody). I believe that the multiple masculinities Batman is thought to represent actually, in his narratives, cohere into a single idealized masculinity: "As a model of masculinity, the Batman mythos also reinforces cultural ideologies of man-making in that he suppresses his complex feelings (and, some would argue, his sexuality as well) to become a fighter for the public good" (111). As such, Wayne performs overtly heterosexual masculinity in dubiously acceptable ways, made possible primarily through his socioeconomic status. As an unmarried playboy continuously seeking exotic companionship from women with whom he cannot actually converse, Bruce Wayne/Batman constructs a heterosex-

ual reputation that perpetuates itself and, in doing so, provides him an immediate alibi whenever he might require one: "Bruce Wayne has been sighted at the same hotel as a visiting Hollywood sex queen," he reflects, preparing for his first venture into Gotham's more dangerous neighborhoods; "That should generate sufficient rumors — to account for my whereabouts for the next few hours" (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 8.1). If Gordon, who decides to end the affair with Sarah Essen and resume an honest and faithful relationship with his wife, is our accepted embodiment of correct masculinity, we are left to wonder why Wayne's act of serial philandering, disguising an actually celibate lifestyle, is left uncertainly uncriticized. Barbara Gordon calls him a "pig" (81.1), but the reader witnesses evidence of his asceticism and sobriety; his sexually-charged relationships with women are quite literally a "performance" (81.4), made visible only to his trusted, eternally loyal butler, Alfred Pennyworth. In fact, Wayne appears to view open sexuality as threatening: when entering "the enemy camp" (10.1-2), he targets neither drugs nor organized crime (both later condemned in *Year One*), but sex workers, surrounded by pornographic iconography. Notably, the sexuality he seems to find most threatening is female heterosexuality, which does little to dismiss the ongoing speculation about Batman's sexuality.

He is allowed and encouraged to perform the masculine archetypes of the suave, charming womanizer, the successful entrepreneur and innovator, and the grim, feudal warrior, to name a few of the most prevalent masculinities identifi-

able in Batman comics. As Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl observe in their essay on gender and sexuality in crime-focused comics, "[o]ur concept of who is capable of being a hero is tied to the hierarchical notions of hegemonic masculinity and is negotiated over time. Gays and lesbians challenge hegemonic masculinity and pose a threat to the status quo" (156). I will shortly address how lesbians challenge this hegemonic masculinity in Gotham, but first I will examine how Batman and his performances of idealized masculinity elaborate upon and enforce the masculinities established by Gordon, resulting in a hegemonic masculinity influencing everyone in Gotham City.

As Wilde observes, Bruce Wayne *as Batman* dedicates himself (hence the asceticism) to honing his natural abilities in service of his mission. He returns to Gotham in the beginning of *Year One,* after years of training as a martial artist, at his physical peak. In fact, to return to the idealized masculinity constructed in police force, Wayne embodies the characteristics sought by George F. Chandler when seeking recruits for the New York State Police (NYSP) during the 1920s. Regarding officers in the NYSP, Chandler "insisted that the standard of masculine military self-presentation…was to be much stricter than that of either citizen-soldiers or city police" (Ray 221). Indeed, Mazzucchelli's depictions of Bruce Wayne/Batman (as well as those of Mazzucchelli's successors) dovetail neatly with Chandler's vision of NYSP officers fitting "the 'Anglo-Saxon' ideal — tall, square jawed, broad shouldered, and 'physically perfect,'" with "gentlemanly

self-control" to boot (221). Indeed, everything from Bruce Wayne's magnificently square jaw to his English butler aligns him with the "'Anglo-Saxon' ideal" Chandler idolized in his "masculine military" force, in stark contrast to the predominantly Irish-American GCPD and NYPD forces. I believe this connection serves to further elevate Wayne/Batman over the less capable allies and opponents with whom he fights throughout the Bat-mythos.

If the complicated masculinities offered by his class and physicality were not enough, Wayne/Batman is a capable inventor who develops his own, implausible technology — a Bat-glider and a literal Bat-signal that summons a horde of bats from miles away, for instance, not to mention the armor that protects him from the weapons of his opponents (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 84.1, 57.4-5, 95.6) — and who forges strategic alliances enabling him to orchestrate the downfall of the politically corrupt and sabotage organized crime (41.1, 95.6-7). He constructs, through a careful employment of fear and deliberate iconography, a mythology that advantages him over his opponents before he even arrives at the scene (33.4-5, 34, 35.1-3). Batman simultaneously embodies myriad identities: the Detective, an inventor, a monster, feared by his enemies as "the Dark Knight, a masked avenger," and known "to the innocent, [as] the Caped Crusader, fighting to protect them from harm" (DiPaolo 57).

However, Batman's methods stray far from what nineteenth and twentieth century police cultures iterate as correct masculinity. Batman instigates violence

against women and children in especially vulnerable, abusive situations (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 12.5-13.5); he attacks non-violent criminals without any judicial authority and with excessive force, nearly killing one of the perpetrators (31-33.3); he abuses his wealth and position to escape prosecution for criminal charges (65-66), and inducts members of Gotham's judicial infrastructure into his illegal activities (41.1, 95.7), both of which could constitute a form of corruption. For every performance of a correct, approved masculinity, there is one which strays far too close to those condemned as criminal, corrupt, and despicable throughout *Year One.*

II. "Living a Lie": How to be a Queer Woman in the Batman's World

With the establishment of Gordon as a figure who, within the fictive confines of Gotham City, performs correct masculinity (and accordingly, a kind of correct morality as well), and of Batman as a figure who performs idealized, and disturbingly criminal, masculinities, the question becomes whether and how those modes of masculinity are applied to others. Curiously, it is difficult to pinpoint any representation of femininity, correct, idealized, or otherwise, in Gotham's female characters. I attribute this to two principle causes: the complex question of what, precisely, defines a "correct femininity," or a feminine-coded morality; and superhero comics' longstanding history of disinterest in women save when they can be used as a plot device to motivate the character development of the male

protagonist.[7] Instead, crime-fighting female characters operate within the constructions of masculinity articulated in Gotham's male-dominated, crime-fighting institutions.

In their analysis of gender and sexuality in comics, Phillips and Strobl argue that, "despite a technical inclusion of diverse characters, [...] underlying messages about crime and justice emerge in a world dominated by heterosexual, white males" (141). Here, I will complicate their argument by expanding on two of their examples, one of which, I believe, supports their argument, and the other of which escapes the hetero-patriarchal constructs of gender. Thus, instead of women who "are in need of male protection [as] is reinforced through many mainstream comic books" (143) or perform enhanced femininity to counter the gender fluidity suggested by their roles as police and vigilantes respectively, we have something far more interesting: a series of complex, textually or implicitly queer women who challenge or escape institutional constructs of heteronormative masculinity in their respective spheres of service.[8]

The first of these women is Renee Montoya, a detective in the GCPD's Major Crimes Unit. Originally appearing in 1992 and created for *Batman: the Animated Series,* Renee consistently appeared in Batman and other DC comics until

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[7] This phenomenon is colloquially referred to as "fridging," via comics writer Gail Simone's project "Women in Refrigerators," which sought to catalogue the victims of fridging in comics.

[8] Notably, both of the women I address were either created or reinvented as queer by Greg Rucka between 2004-10.

2011 ("The Question (Renee Montoya)"). While she is not the only lesbian in the

unit — her immediate supervisor, Captain Maggie Sawyer, is also a lesbian — I

have chosen to focus on her in the GCPD, and in this chapter, for two reasons.

Firstly, she has a narrative explicitly constructed around her queerness within the

GCPD and the broader framework of Gotham's freakishness; and secondly, she is

one of the few characters of color in the Gotham mythos, and her Latina identity

further complicates her expressions of gender and sexuality.

   While the majority of my reading of Renee will draw from the "Half A

Life" arc of *Gotham Central,* I will begin with a brief scene in *Batwoman: Elegy,*

which, though written several years later, precedes the narrative presented in

"Half A Life," and, I believe, establishes a model of Kate's and Renee's identities

and ideologies.[9] The scene in question features Renee preparing to leave Kate

Kane, her girlfriend at the time, and Kate attempting to entice her to take a sick

day and stay. The scene rapidly shifts from a tender kiss, uninterrupted by speech

bubbles or captions, to Renee preparing once again to leave: "I've got to go to

work, you've got to go to *class,"* she tells Kate, hand raised as if to brush her

back, and then the proverbial other shoe drops. "I dropped out," Kate responds,

and the moment shatters. Renee leaves the bed, dressing while Kate spreads her

arms expansively, aggressively taking up the panel, alone but for Renee's out-

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[9] While *Gotham Central* is, usefully, paginated, *Batwoman: Elegy* is not; therefore the issue title
will suffice.

stretched hand in the foreground (Fig. 3). "At least I'm *honest* with myself!" she

shouts:

> At least I'm not *pretending* to be something I'm *not!* That's what
> this "Sergeant Bullock" stuff is about! You're afraid your cop-bud-
> dies will find out you're *queer!* So don't tell me how to live my
> life! Not when you're living a *lie!* Not when you're *lying* every day
> of your *life,* Renee! Not when you're a *damn* liar —

Kate's rant is interrupted by a SLAM sound effect, startling her from angry, de-

fensive, and accusing to silent, shocked, eyes wide in realization of what she's

done (Fig. 4). As subsequent scenes demonstrate, she cannot take back what she

has said; the unforgivable, unwelcome snarl of *queer* is fatal to her relationship

with Renee (Rucka, Williams III, and Stewart "Go 2").

As Paul Petrovic notes in his essay on queer identities in *Batwoman: Ele-

gy,* this pejorative use of queer is the only use in the entire text, "maximizing

Kate's desperate need for Renee to come out and affirm her true identity" (72).

Shifting the focus away from Kate, however, and contextualizing this in the pre-

existing "Half A Life" arc, in which Renee is outed, Petrovic's second observation

reveals a devastating truth:

> In reality, Kate is defensive about the fact that Renee has chal-
> lenged her aimlessness in life and that Renee has accepted being a
> closeted lesbian in order to continue her public service. Unlike
> Kate herself, who embraced honesty, Renee publicly lies to society
> about her sexual identity in order to maintain her private dream of
> normality. Kate, then, is angry at herself, as well as Renee, for Re-
> nee's having achieved the life of public service that she denied her-
> self. (72)

Fig. 3 (left): the argument between Kate and Renee. The constant motion apart is especially key to these panels: Williams is able to articulate the dissolution of a relationship in just four images, as Renee moves further and further out of Kate's reach. (*Batwoman: Elegy*)

Fig. 4 (right): The superimposition of the SLAM sound effect shatters Kate's tirade, and her anger; but as the following pages show, one door closing simply means a second opens. Kate is inspired to become Batwoman shortly after this moment. (*Batwoman: Elegy)*
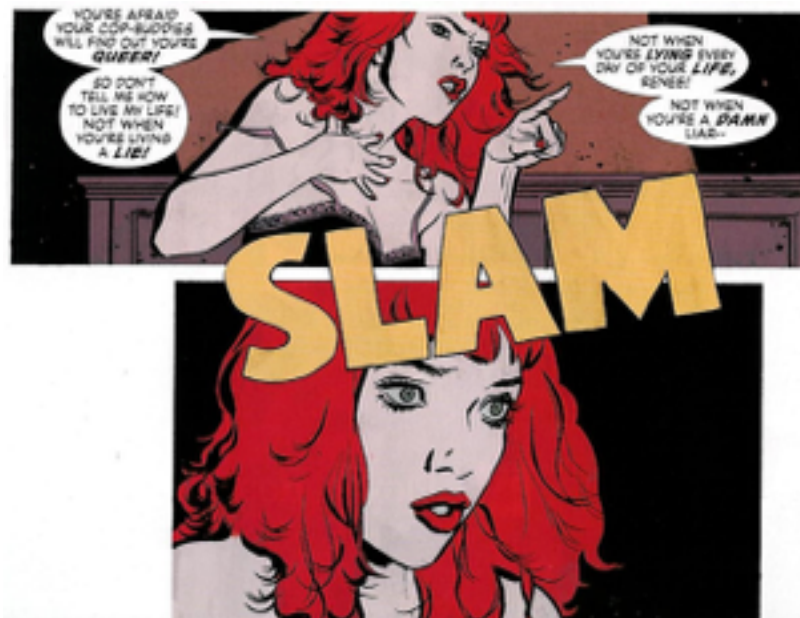
I object to the language Petrovic uses to describe Renee's private lesbianism, as it reinforces Kate's perspective that Renee's decision to privilege her service over a freer expression of her sexuality is "lying" rather than a perfectly reasonable defense against the homophobia endemic in the GCPD. His point is, however, absolutely correct. Furthermore, it identifies a theme that we can trace from Renee to Kate in both their modes of public service. Identity is absolutely key to their positions as arbiters of justice, and their performances of gender and sexuality are accordingly inextricable from these roles. Such construction is necessary to Jim Gordon, whose overtly correct heterosexual masculinity stabilizes him within the chaos of Batman's Gotham City; and, as Yvonne Tasker notes, "[i]f the male body is to be a point of security, the hero a figure who can be relied upon, then bodily integrity and heterosexuality in particular, need to be maintained within the action narrative" (15).

Though it goes without saying that Renee Montoya is not a heterosexual, cisgender man,[10] she does perform aspects of masculinity — or, to borrow from Tasker again, "musculinity." In Tasker's writing, "musculinity" is a manifestation of the "masculinisation of the female body, which is effected most visibly through her muscles [and] indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters" (149). Renee is strong, unafraid to be physically aggres-

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[10] Though the fact that there does seem to be a trend of vigilantes of either gender being sexually or romantically oriented towards women in Gotham City warrants further investigation.

sive against those she encounters in her work as a detective for the GCPD — especially when doing so defends her girlfriend's safety (Rucka and Lark 164). Like her male colleagues — and her lesbian supervisor — she dresses in loose-fitting suits, button-up shirts in a uniform greyscale-and-white (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Renee stands in the center of the image; without that centering or the sweep of her hair and the absence of a tie, it would be nearly impossible to discern anything especially feminine about her wardrobe. (*Gotham Central*)

Contrasted with other women — for example, Miss Lavelle, whose warm pink blouse is open at the collar in the same manner as Renee's but conveys an unmistakable femininity — the masculine affects of Renee's wardrobe are impossible to miss (Fig. 6-7) (130-131).

Fig. 6 (left): the pink-clad Miss Lavelle, wearing her hair down and her shirt — collared and professional, like Renee's — open at the neck. (*Gotham Central*)

Fig. 7 (right): Renee, mirroring Miss Lavelle's pose. Incredulity at the cost of stolen lingerie aside, nothing about the drape of her own pressed shirt indicates a desire to be looked at. If she were to wear a tie, her attire would be indistinguishable from that of her male colleagues. (*Gotham Central*)

Last but not least, she is a woman with a gun — an object of symbolic, violent power in action cinema, as Tasker notes, and especially in Batman comics, where Batman himself refuses to carry guns; accordingly, Renee is further articulated as "symbolically male," employing a "transgressive iconography" every time she appears (Tasker 135, 132).

Significantly, her gun and her sexuality both play key roles in the "Half A Life" arc, which details a plot masterminded by Harvey Dent/Two-Face to isolate Renee from any friends or family in hopes that she will choose to be with him romantically. To do so, he outs her to her work and her conservative Catholic family, frames her twice for homicide using her GCPD-issued gun, and finally kidnaps her from prison, staging her abduction as an escape attempt.[11]

With the loss of her weapon, and the revelation of her sexuality to her colleagues and family, Renee loses both her signifiers of masculinity and heteronormative stability. She cannot even cling to the established articulation of lesbianism in the GCPD embodied by Captain Maggie Sawyer; when Maggie, a white

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[11] It would be fair to say that Dent's logic is somewhat flawed.

woman originally from Superman's adopted hometown of Metropolis, attempts to

offer advice on coming out, Renee shuts her down immediately:

> *You've* been where I am? Are you *sure?* Because somehow I *don't*
> think you *have.* I just have a *hard* time picturing that. I have a hard
> time picturing you as a *Latina*, for instance. I have a hard time pic-
> turing your parents as immigrants from the D.R. who go to mass
> *every* Sunday. And I don't really see you having to explain *every*
> *time* you see them why they *don't* have *grandchildren* yet. Or why
> it is you're going to *hell* when you *die.* This *isn't* Metropolis, Cap-
> tain, and *not* just because our guy works at *night.* This *isn't* the
> City of Tomorrow, it's not San Francisco, it's not New York. It's
> Gotham, and if you want to see what that means, just check your
> *squad room.* So you'll *forgive* me if I ask you to keep your advice
> to *yourself.* (Rucka and Lark 150.4-8)

One would hope that, in a setting full of far more bizarre and "deviant" behaviors

than lesbianism, Renee's sexuality would be considered normal, but even in

Gotham that seems too much to hope for. The above mention of Maggie's squad

room refers to the homophobic taunting Renee endures after a picture of her kiss-

ing her girlfriend, Daria Hernandez, was posted to the squad's bulletin board.

Other officers call her "dyke" behind her back (152.6), and speculate openly

about whether or not Renee is going through "an *experimental* phase" or if she's

"the *real thing*" (142.5). "Nothing wrong with being curious…is there, Renee?"

Tommy Burke sneers, while Renee is frozen in the photographic stillness Michael

Lark captures so well, staring her open closet door in the face (Fig. 8) (145.2).

Fig. 8: Renee facing the publicly posted evidence of her lesbianism with all her coworkers behind her. Her expression is arrested and arresting: we sense the frozen moment of awful realization, how fiercely she has defended herself from this outing, in the panel. (*Gotham Central*)

As awful as these attitudes are, they aren't entirely unexpected.[12] The GCPD, after all, has institutionalized a very specific code of masculinity as embodied by Gordon, and while that code is intended to dissuade unchivalrous behavior towards women, Renee is twice removed from the type of woman this masculinity anticipates. She is a woman in a male-dominated profession, who has eschewed markers of traditional femininity in favor of more masculine affects, and she is a woman who is utterly inaccessible to her heterosexual male colleagues. To extend the dynamics suggested by Guy Reel's analysis of correct

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[12] I would suggest, however, that such attitudes are thoroughly critiqued by Rucka and Lark, who work to expose such attitudes and to humanize Renee as fully as possible throughout "Half A Life."

masculinity in detective narratives, Renee now occupies an uncertain, unstable

space between patriarchal heteronormative conceptions of masculinity and femi-

ninity. Her inaccessibility to male desires, combined with her own adopted role of

defender of Daria Hernandez, situate her as neither deserving nor needing male

defense — which renders the culmination of "Half A Life" doubly unstable.

As mentioned above, Harvey Dent/Two-Face abducts Renee from a prison

transport after having made every effort to cut her off from her friends and family,

but he does so as an act of protection, at least in his own mind. "Don't you *see*

it?" he asks the horrified Renee. "You've been living with *two* lives, and I've *bro-

ken* down the *wall* between them. I've *saved* you. We're the *same,* Renee" (224.3).

In Dent's eyes, Renee's closeted life renders her deviant, much as his doubled

identity has rendered him a freak and an outlaw in Gotham City. His "saving" Re-

nee serves as a means of demonstrating to her that she is too "deviant" (an obser-

vation shared by the serial rapist Marty Lipari) to remain in the normal population

(163.5, 224.4-225.5), and the panels themselves certainly support Dent's belief.

As Dent loses his temper at Renee's own justifiable anger, the Dent/Two-Face

split becomes distinctly articulated in the lettering and panel borders, which be-

come, respectively, fractured in shape, and unstable delineations of the page's ac-

tion. The unstable panel borders aren't consistent for entire pages, but start and

stop and resume at will — for example, in the last two panels of Fig. 10, in which

Dent's normalized speech (as seen elsewhere) shifts abruptly into sharper, jagged

bubbles, with a harsher font than used for Renee or Dent's standard font. The unstable panel borders persist only as long as Dent's Two-Face dialogue, but within that constraint, they are constant — even if Renee is the only one speaking or even present in the panel (222, 223.1-2, 223.6). This suggests that in her anger, she becomes deviant, as physically dangerous and mentally unstable as Dent/ Two-Face himself.

At the same time, however, she is not quite deviant enough: Dent sees their romantic union as a means of sealing the deal in more ways than one, but, as Renee points out, "Harvey, *you* outed *me!* I'm *gay!* I'm a *dyke,* a *lesbian,* I like *girls!"* (226.1); her orientation is so essential to her personhood as to be inviolable and incorruptible, and it sets her, dangerously, in opposition to the sexual and gendered response Dent expects in return for "saving" her. Having "made certain [that she has nothing to go back to]," Dent expects romantic resolution: he is on his knees before her, holding her hands (still bearing the handcuffs from the prison transport) tightly in his own (226.3) (Fig. 9). The next panel (Fig. 10) sees Renee above him, face set harshly in Lark's rough brushwork, clearly saying that Dent will "*never* get what [he *wants*] from [her]," and that she will do "*everything* [she] can to *escape* [him]" (226.4-5). There is a very conventionally masculine heroic attitude to Renee's response: she does not attempt to get Dent/Two-Face to lower his guard by feigning acquiescence to his proposal, but rejects it outright — as one would expect the typical, ideal-driven, male hero to do.

Fig. 9 (right): Note the horrifying approximation of the proposal pose, how clearly Renee is attempting to free herself from Dent's grasp, even as she wears the broken handcuffs he placed upon her. (*Gotham Central*)

Fig. 10 (right): Renee's set, determined expression works beautifully here with Lark's heavy inking; notably, hers is the only voice that matters in the top panel. The following sequence is a good example of Dent's dissolution into Two-Face as both the panel borders and the lettering collapse into unstable fragments of themselves.
(*Gotham Central*)

Of course, in such an exchange between a male hero and a male villain, a kind of expectation of respect is established — or at least an expectation that whatever punishment awaits will affect only the hero. But Renee is not a man, and she has a girlfriend still within Dent/Two-Face's reach, and so she is abruptly cast back into that liminal space in which she can neither properly defend herself nor expect outside aid. She and Dent/Two-Face struggle for his gun; it drops to the ground, and is kicked out of frame by a booted foot. For one small, wordless panel, both Renee and Dent/Two-Face stare up at the intervening individual (who is, of course, Batman, though the GCPD is hot on his heels), expressions frozen in what looks to me like horror and incredulity respectively (Fig. 11 [right]) (229.3). As

Fig. 11

Batman subdues Dent, Renee watches from a small inset panel, face grim (Fig. 12 [left]) (229.6), until, finally, the action ends, Dent hand-cuffed, the gun secreted away into the darkness of Bat-man's cape. "I took *care* of it," he tells Renee, who re-acts with rage. "You *WHAT?*" she cries, brows drawn

Fig. 12

down, face bloodied from her fight with Two-Face, lettering noticeably larger than the standard size (Fig. 13). "You took *care* of this? So he can *break* out in another year or two, put me through this *again? That's* how you took care of

this?" (239.3-4). With the expression of this absolutely legitimate fear, Renee reminds the reader once again of the liminal, dangerous space she occupies, in which she is at risk for refusing male attention, and cannot count upon intervention unless her attacker is freakish enough to garner the attention of the Batman.

This, then, is what awaits a lesbian in the GCPD. In the confines of an institution predicated on a specific construction of masculinity — which is ultimately inaccessible to her, despite her performances in its model — Renee is ultimately forced into a constrictive, unstable space exposing her to the dangers of patriarchal authority and expectation, all because she refuses to compromise her selfhood for the safety of any attempt at a correct femininity.

Fig. 13: Note the anger on Renee's face, and also the lettering: her "WHAT" is noticeably larger than Batman's standard-sized "I took *care* of it," reflecting her anger. (*Gotham Central*)

No such claim can be made about Kate Kane and her adopted status as Batwoman. A Jewish lesbian superhero, Kate becomes Batwoman after her separation from the military under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and dedicates herself to public service in Gotham. Unlike Jim Gordon, whose performance of correct, sta-

ble masculinity is compromised by his association with Batman, or Renee Montoya, whose lesbianism positions her unstably and unsafely between normative gender roles, or Wayne/Batman, whose conflicting performances of masculinity effectively destabilize the entire construction of gender and sexuality in Gotham City, there is no split or conflict to Kate Kane's identity. This, I believe, results from Kate's narrative in *Batwoman: Elegy* following her from her childhood to her adult vigilantism, and cultivating a space in which Kate is able to construct an undivided identity. My analysis will therefore focus on the "Go" arc of *Batwoman: Elegy,* but will draw on artist J.H. Williams III's and colorist Dave Stewart's representations of Kate in the "Elegy" arc, which follows a Kate Kane whose identity is firmly established.

I will first draw upon "Go 2," which efficiently articulates Kate's brief stint in the military. Kate's ambition since the murder of her mother and sister, which she indirectly witnessed ("Go 1"), has been to dedicate herself to public service through the military in which her parents served. Like Renee, she chooses not to disclose her sexual orientation to this institution — which, like the GCPD, is a traditionally male-dominated space, but, unlike the GCPD, has so internalized the hegemonic expectation of patriarchal heteronormativity that existing otherwise is illegal; and, like Renee, her orientation is disclosed for her. However, Kate is given a choice Renee was never offered. Colonel Reyes, Kate's superior officer, tells her, "I have some *discretion* in this matter":

> You can tell me right now that this is a *mistake.* That it's some joke, that you were goofing around. That it's a simple *misunder-standing.* And that it will *never* happen *again.* Tell me that, and you'll face *disciplinary* action. You'll *lose* the chance to be *first captain* next semester. But you'll still *graduate*, and you'll *stay* in the *Army.* […] I'm doing this because you're a damn fine cadet. Because I believe you'll make a damn fine officer. ("Go 2")

Kate's continued service in the military — which, as Paul Petrovic notes, "is her ideal place to offer service" (71) — is therefore predicated upon the disavowal of her identity, her selfhood, in an act of submission to an institution of inflexibly constructed gender roles; her staying in the closet. However, Kate chooses instead her ideal *of* service, citing the West Point honor code's edict that "[a] cadet shall not *lie*, cheat, or steal, nor suffer others to do so," before rejecting the hypocrisy and inflexibility of the military altogether. A series of four panels (Fig. 14) documents her conviction: the line between her brows and the suggestion of a frown in the first panel smooth away as Williams III moves closer with each subsequent panel, culminating in a close-up of Kate's mouth, declaring "I'm gay" (Rucka, Williams III, and Stewart "Go 2").

Fig. 14: Note the easing of Kate's expression in each successive panel. In the first, her brows are drawn heavily, downwards, with a furrowed brow and a frown. In the second, her brows are relaxed, forehead uncreased, mouth set determinedly. The third panel emphasizes both the progression of her line of sight — directed elsewhere in the first panel,

and directed through the page to the reader in the second and third — and sets up the significance of her speech by centering on her mouth in the fourth panel. (*Batwoman: Elegy*)

This assertion of one aspect of her identity — her sexuality — at this point necessarily dissolves the aspect of herself that finds meaning through service. Returning to Petrovic's analysis, Williams III's deliberately undefined panels in this sequence, and in all the flashback sequences of "Go," visually reinforce the fact that Kate's self is similarly "undefined and paralyzed" by this unstable position resulting from the conflict between her values and her sexuality (72). So, naturally, she goes home to Gotham City — an environment fraught with unstable and conflicting articulations of gender, sexuality, and public service.

It takes Kate some time to determine "what to do, what to *be*," (Rucka, Williams III, and Stewart "Go 2"), but she is successful, as Petrovic details extensively in his own essay, arguing that "it is only in Gotham City that Kate most closely approximates a perfect public service as well as a perfect performance of sexuality" (73). However, I wish to extend Petrovic's argument to account for the lack of conflict between Kate's public identity as Kate Kane and her masked identity as Batwoman. Petrovic notes that, "in Gotham [Kate] has clearly come out, employing masculine if not gender neutral clothing while at social balls and openly flirting as well as dancing with women" (73), but her performances of her gender and sexuality are not restricted to her life without the Bat-symbol etched in

red across her chest.[13] She openly retains many of her defining physical character-

istics from Kane-to-Batwoman: the red lipstick she forwent at West Point is a

trademark of her casual wear and always perfectly applied in costume; she makes

no effort to disguise the unusual pallor of her skin as Batwoman, nor the shocking

red of her hair (though she does disguise its length, presumably so that her oppo-

nents will underestimate her martial abilities). Kate's Jewishness (Rucka,

Williams III, and Stewart "Elegy: Agitato") also goes with her into her service,

represented in the colors of gevurah incorporated into her costume (Rucka, Per-

sonal Interview).[14] Her costuming — including the heels on the costume's original

boots (Rucka, Williams III, and Stewart "Go 3") — expressly maintains her gen-

der identity and expression. The conclusion the text suggests, then, is that while

Batman could, theoretically, be anyone (incalculable wealth and Olympian

physique aside, his complicated performances of identity make it impossible to

ascertain exactly who Wayne/Batman is), Kate Kane is the only individual who

could be Batwoman. Unlike Renee, or any of the other characters for that matter,

her identity is absolutely undivided between her public and vigilante activities,

because she has eked out a space in which she is not required to perform identity

for anyone.

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[13] Though such events are not depicted in *Batwoman: Elegy,* it's worth noting that the New 52 series *Batwoman* has Kate kissing (and proposing to) her girlfriend, Maggie Sawyer, in costume as Batwoman (Williams III, Blackman, and Stewart n.p.)

[14] Rucka reveals that the kabbalistic imagery in the red of Kate's uniform, "the pillar of severity… the colors of *war*" ("Go 3"), was incorporated by Williams III because of her Jewishness.

III. Conclusion

What, then, can be concluded about masculinity in Gotham City? Within the two institutions of the GCPD and the Batman, the former having been irrevocably destabilized by its informal association with Batman, it would seem that there is no escape from patriarchal expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Gordon is all but required to establish an expectation of correct heterosexual masculinity in order to both legitimize Batman and his own alliance with Batman, which simultaneously destabilizes Gordon's own performance of masculinity. His establishment of such specific masculinities, and Batman's own glorification of multiple masculinities, leaves those who do not meet them exactly exposed to danger — like Detective Renee Montoya, whose sexuality makes her vulnerable to attacks in spite of her efforts to conform to the masculinities expected in the GCPD. Batman's masculinities conflict to the extent that it is nearly impossible to determine who the "real" Wayne/Batman is, and his perpetual instability is, in some ways, necessitated by the eternal serialization of his comics. The only escape seems to be that of Kate Kane, who is able to adopt the iconography of the Batman without sacrificing her gender identity and sexual orientation in the least — and who, notably, avoids having anything to do with Batman in her own vigilante activities.

What I conclude, therefore, is that Batman's destabilizing effect upon the GCPD and his own identity has cultivated an environment that actively works

against those who attempt to meet its requirements of gender identity and fall somehow short. The only way for socially deviant bodies to escape that victimization is to either remove themselves entirely from that environment, or allow themselves to be subsumed into its increasingly constrictive paradigm. What then becomes the baseline for gender performance in Gotham City — the new normal, as it were — is a construct of masculinity that, having been internalized by most of the citizens, quashes nearly every iteration of resistance. Gordon's brief affair is terminated, and his role as a correct, heteronormative father is firmly reestablished; Batman cannot function safely and secretly without the myriad performances of conflicting masculinities put on by Wayne. Renee is forced to affect heterosexual masculinity, and is punished by the narrative when it is revealed that she is a lesbian. Only Kate Kane, in the entirety of the Bat-mythos, is able to effectively escape the constraints of masculinity imposed upon her, and she can only do so by manufacturing a space in which she does not have to perform identity for anyone — in which she can be wholly herself. The end result is thus a self-regulating construct of masculinity that works to almost entirely eradicate deviance from its confines, despite its own unstable, deviant construction.

CHAPTER TWO:
"Until I stand revealed in the glass": Vision, Madness, and Identity in
Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth

My first chapter examined the constructions of masculinity in Gotham City, focusing on how those constructions are employed by Batman as a means of regulating the population. While this chapter continues to analyze Batman's regulatory methods, it does so with a distinctly Foucauldian interest by examining the visual constructions of madness and identity in Gotham City.

The treatment of mental illness within Batman comics has always been extreme. A casual perusal of the Gotham "rogues' gallery" — containing such pervasive cultural icons as the Joker, Two-Face, the Riddler, Clayface, and many more — makes it difficult to call to mind a villain who is not committed to Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane rather than imprisoned at the all-but-forgotten Blackgate Penitentiary. This persistent and damning equation of mental illness with evil — especially in light of the fact that there are no explicit articulations of non-criminalized mental illnesses in the Batman comics I examine — is never directly critiqued within Batman comics, but several explore the relationship between madness and criminality inherent to Batman, his encounters with

Gotham's villains, and the legacy he leaves to his successors. *Arkham Asylum* (1989), written by Grant Morrison, with art by Dave McKean, and lettering by Gaspar Saladino, tests the veracity of editor Dennis O'Neil's declaration that Batman "is not insane" (qtd. Brooker 276) by investigating the rationality of the Batman through the construction of a Foucauldian mirror of the mad criminals Batman faces. Read through the contextual framework of Michel Foucault's discussion of "Recognition by Mirror," *Arkham Asylum* is ultimately unable to judge in favor of Batman's sanity, thus destabilizing the established construction of heroism and criminality in the Batman mythos.

In this chapter, I will examine how *Arkham Asylum* engages with the editorial edict demanding Batman's sanity, closely analyzing the qualities contributing to and complicating the relationship between mental illness and identity. Like several Batman comics published in the late 1980s, *Arkham Asylum* has the advantage of some existing scholarship, which I will incorporate into my own argument as is useful. Principally, I will draw on Marc Singer's argument that *Arkham Asylum* successfully performs an intervention on the Batman of the 1980s as informed by Frank Miller. Such an understanding is essential to a reading of *Arkham Asylum,* because it suggests that Miller's Batman, represented in both *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: Year One* (1987) as a violent, sexist homophobe whose politics border on conservative libertarianism, is an inherently unstable, deviant figure, who, I will argue, regulates and is regulated by

Gotham's infamous rogues gallery.

Taking their cue from Miller's Batman, writer Grant Morrison, artist Dave McKean, and letterer Gaspar Saladino situate Batman within an institution of mental irregularity he has been instrumental in populating. The overall effect of such situating is to demand that the reader consider, as through Geoff Klock's useful analysis of the villains as reflections of Batman's own character, the similarities between Batman and his rogues' gallery. My own analysis of *Arkham Asylum* will substantiate Klock's broader claim through close readings of the comic's visual patterns, focusing specifically on McKean's representations of vision, and how these representations engage with the comic's discourse of sanity/insanity. Similarly, I will provide an analysis of Saladino's lettering and suggest that it plays a key role in removing Batman from his accustomed seat of regulation to a space in which he is as deviant as the madmen he attempts to regulate. Michel Foucault's social history of the institution of the asylum, particularly his examination of the practices of Philippe Pinel at Bicêtre and Salpêtrière, provide an especially useful lens through which to consider Batman's interactions with the inmates of Arkham Asylum. Accordingly, I will investigate Batman himself as a mental institution within Gotham City, and propose that the regulated villains perform a reflective regulation of Batman in their own right, one which demands that the wearer of the cowl acknowledge the instability, and even insanity, inherent to the institution of the Batman.

I. "Arkham is a looking glass": Recognition by Mirror in *Arkham Asylum*

Dennis O'Neil, Batman editor from 1986 to the early 2000s (Brooker *Batman Unmasked* 276), was the ultimate authority to the Bat-book creators. Shortly into his tenure as editor, he instituted what was known as the *Bat-Bible,* which laid down the laws for writing Batman: the essentials of his origin story, his abilities, and his character. Though, as documented by Will Brooker in his excellent analysis of the *Bat-Bible* (276-277), O'Neil is quick to privilege "a great story" over continuity or his own personal preferences for the character (qtd. Brooker 277), "the preferences of a single man who wrote Batman in the early 1970s now take precedence over the interpretation of every contemporary scripter [*sic*] and artist who deals with the character" (Brooker 276). The most important and strongest of the *Bat-Bible* edicts is that "Wayne/Batman is not insane...and he never kills" (qtd. Brooker 276).

The first part of this edict is the most troubling, and the one I will dismantle in this chapter. Throughout Batman comics, most of his opponents have been (and remain) "crazy" — that is, crazy in the socially feared, exaggerated manner used to explain the seemingly unexplainable, and, in a more Foucauldian reading, to control "crazy" (deviant) people and their actions by isolating their bodies and regulating their minds until "normalcy" is achieved. The articulation of an individual as mentally ill is not, in itself, problematic; but, combined with a host of vilified, monstrous madmen set against a single stoic, sane individual acting as

protector of "normal" civilians, the narrative becomes one that reinforces the cul-

tural perception of mental illness as being only violent, dangerous, and criminal.

My argument against O'Neil's construction of the Batman will therefore draw

upon a graphic novel implying that Batman is not as sane as the *Bat-Bible* com-

mands: *Arkham Asylum* (1989).

Arkham Asylum is one of the best-known graphic novels to depict Batman,

and likely the most ambitious,[1] though as James F. Wurtz notes, "the plot is rather

thin," suffering from an interest more psychological than narrative (556). The in-

mates have taken over the Asylum, surreptitiously aided by Doctor Charles

Cavendish, who has orchestrated their release to lure Batman inside and trap him

as instructed by the sixty-year-old journal of Amadeus Arkham,[2] the Asylum's

founder. The journal, dated to the 1920s and related through eerie flashbacks,

documents Arkham's personal traumas and lifelong struggles with madness, as

well as his and his mother's belief in a shadowy, monstrous Bat haunting the Asy-

lum. Morrison and McKean both parallel Batman's journey through the Asylum

with Arkham's descent into madness, but ultimately release Batman back into the

real world — or, as the Joker chillingly calls it, "the Asylum," — "purified and

purged of negative elements" (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino n.p., 66).

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[1] Morrison cites Jung, Aleister Crowley's brand of paganism, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonder-land* as influences on *Arkham Asylum* (2, 26, 15).

[2] For clarity's sake, Amadeus Arkham will be referred to throughout the paper as "Arkham," while the institution bearing his name will be referred to as the Asylum.

Morrison's retrospective note[3] that Batman has been able to overcome his psychological demons is difficult to accept, given the entirety of the graphic novel. The narrative parallels between Batman and Arkham, the violent reiterations of Batman's trauma, and the instability created by McKean's multimedia art make it practically impossible to exit the Asylum without having serious doubts about Batman's sanity. It is equally difficult to approach the text without some skepticism, as Batman confides to Gordon that he is "afraid that the Joker may be *right* about me. Sometimes I…*question* the rationality of my actions" (n.p.). However, the less overt visual mechanisms — McKean's nightmarish art and interest in the politics of vision, and Saladino's frightening, individualized lettering — make the most compelling argument for a mad Batman. The representation of vision within *Arkham Asylum* is disturbing; in fact, only three prominent characters are shown to have eyes consistently, and all of them are articulated in the language of sanity. Jim Gordon, Gotham City Police Commissioner, Dr. Ruth Adams, a psychologist at the Asylum, and the Joker, the most notorious of Batman's foes, are all articulated almost exclusively through acts of looking[4] and the language of sanity. As each of these characters plays an instrumental, relatively stable role in the broader

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[3] The script, annotated by Morrison, was included in the fifteenth anniversary edition reprint.

[4] Fascinatingly, there's a confusion of these gazes throughout the text, as it is repeatedly unclear whether or not each of these sighted characters is looking at Batman or breaking the fourth wall to interrogate the reader. This conflation of Batman with the reader is not an unusual occurrence within *Arkham Asylum,* as strong cases can be made for each to be read as an Alice figure journeying down the rabbit hole bookended by quotes from *Alice's Adventures*.

Batman mythos,[5] Batman's absence among them is cause for some unease to the reader: it is the first of many signs that the sane Batman we expect in comics and pop cultural derivatives may not be found in the Asylum.

Jim Gordon's clarity of vision is explained easily enough. As I argued in the previous chapter, Gordon is positioned as the figure most closely adhering to normalcy throughout the Batman comics, and especially those of the 1980s upon which Morrison performs "a critical intervention" (Singer 269). As a working-class detective sans superpowers, he normalizes a number of "correct" masculini-ties: Gordon is a figure of authority who wields it judiciously in spite of corrup-tive influences; a husband and father who acts violently only in response to vio-lent threats against his family (Reel 181, 184, 187-188, 196). That he appears to look directly through the panel at the reader three times (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino n.p.) during his brief tenure in *Arkham Asylum* is not nearly as unsettling as it might otherwise be, if, for example, the art were by Brian Bolland, whose direct linework and lurid coloring render scenes like those in *The Killing Joke* with horrifying clarity, or if the style opening the graphic novel were maintained in this scene. As Lucy Rollin observes, "the overall effect of McKean's use of col-lage further replicates the unconscious" throughout *Arkham Asylum:*

> Alternating with such drawing as we might expect in comic art are
> moments of photographic realism, close-ups of fabrics and objects,

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[5] This is not strictly accurate: Gordon and the Joker are perhaps the two best-known supporting characters in the mythos, though Gordon's role in *Arkham Asylum* is incredibly brief. Dr. Ruth Adams, who plays a crucial part in *Arkham Asylum*, is not seen beyond its pages.

writing, vague suggestions of shadowy figures, and even "quotations" from other artists such as Turner. Such fragmentation visually reproduces the jumble of memory, sensory experience, language, image, and fantasy that characterizes our dreams, allowing a glimpse into the unconscious. (Rollin)

Succeeding Dave McKean's unstable opening, where, as Rollin describes, he blends hyperrealistic backgrounds with impressionistic paints and blurred photography, the unsteady pencilling of Gordon's gaze is, like the man himself, reassuringly stable, a point of fortifying contact preluding the nightmarish journey through the Asylum. Unlike McKean's other art, the unadorned pencils with their rainy streaks present a clear glimpse of Gordon and Batman both, a greyscale baptism and confessional with all the honesty implied in both.

From this conclusion, and her portrayal throughout Arkham Asylum, I believe we are similarly able to establish Dr. Ruth Adams, one of the two remaining sighted characters, as sane. Dr. Ruth Adams, a "psycho-therapist" who "insisted on staying" at the Asylum during the inmate revolt (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino n.p.), is portrayed throughout the narrative with a singular rationality. Despite the danger and instability of her circumstances, and the looming threat of the Joker and Cavendish, she is able to retain her composure as she relates her work in the Asylum to Batman; and, with one exception,[6] she retains a striking clarity

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[6] This exception occurs as she describes Harvey Dent's treatment and progress at the Asylum, specifically the shift from coin to die to tarot cards to expand his options. I believe that this single panel, in which her eyes are ominously blackened, is not an indication of her sanity so much as it is her struggle with the mixed success of her approach to Dent. Despite the increased options available to him, he is increasingly unable to decide, making her defense of her treatment — "Sometimes we have to pull down in order to *rebuild*" — somewhat questionable (n.p.).

of vision as well, in that her eyes and her acts of looking are both clearly depicted. One senses that she is one of the few who sees Batman realistically, and Morrison's annotations certainly support that reading: he describes her as "fix[ing] us and Batman with a cool and measured gaze that says 'I know what I'm talking about, asshole. All you do is beat these people up'" (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino 21). While McKean's rendering might lack quite that level of coolness, his consistency in her depiction — combined with Saladino's normalized lettering, about which a discussion will shortly follow — acts as another stabilizing force. Adams is thus rendered as a second figure of reason. Like Gordon, she bears witness to Batman's doubts about his own sanity, during the word-association exercise demanded by the Joker; unlike Gordon, she becomes, at least temporarily, an investigator into Batman's psyche (Fig. 1).

The third character is the Joker, whose horrifying gaze fixes us before we even enter the Asylum (or even open the graphic novel — the fifteenth anniversary edition represents him staring madly on the cover, one with the Asylum itself as Batman prepares to enter the mouth-like door). It is nearly impossible to ascribe any reading of sanity or rationality to McKean's depiction of the Joker, who looks like nothing so much as the stuff of nightmares with his toxic-green hair, his eyes pearly white but for pin-pricked pupils, his terrible bared-teeth smile. He looks monstrous, even in a narrative bursting with representations of monstrosity, and he looks directly at us. Looking back, one has the chilling thought that he can

see, as Gordon did, past the confines of the page; that he *sees* us (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1 (above): Dr. Ruth Adams conducting a word-association test with Batman. Notice especially the emphasis on gaze and observation. This scene is especially significant in that it represents one of two times that Batman is represented with sight.

Nearly every image of the Joker exaggerates his gaze in a similar fashion;

even in the panels in which he's turned his back to us, what he is looking at or

about to reveal sustains the visual tension throughout *Arkham Asylum.* If the com-

parison to Gordon and Adams were not al-

ready present through the prevalence of his

gaze, the Joker is similarly characterized in

terms of sanity rather than madness, as

Adams suggests:

> The Joker's a *special* case.
> Some of us feel he may be
> *beyond* treatment. In fact,
> we're not even sure if he can
> be properly described as *in-
> sane.* […] It's quite possible
> we may actually be looking at
> some kind of super-sanity
> here. A brilliant new modifi-
> cation of human perception,
> more suited to urban life at
> the end of the twentieth cen-
> tury. (n.p.)

Fig. 2

Despite his internment in the Asylum, the visual madness with which McKean

adorns him, and the fluidity of his performance, it is difficult to write the Joker off

as being simply insane.[7] One has the sense that he knows exactly what he's doing

and why, and that he is one of the few in the Asylum who actually understands

what is going on, and who would be sympathetic to and understanding of the

reader's own terrifying journey through other people's insanities. Adams' hy-

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[7] Judd Winick offers another interpretation of the Joker's sanity or lack thereof in *Batman: Under the Red Hood,* through Jason Todd, formerly the Joker's murder victim:

> *You* — you are, clinically speaking, a *whack-job*. But I know a secret. A *good* one. […]
> You're not nearly as crazy as you'd like us all to believe. Or even as crazy as *you'd* like
> to believe. It just makes it *easier* to justify every sick, monstrous thing you've ever done
> when you play the part of the mad clown. You're crazy, bubba — but you ain't *that* crazy.
> (n.p.)

potheses on the Joker's "super-sanity" — that he has "no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world" — are supported in subsequent panels when, shown a Rorschach card, the Joker describes seeing "two angels screwing in the stratosphere, a constellation of black holes, a biological process beyond the conception of man, a Jewish ventriloquist act locked in the trunk of a red Chevrolet…" (n.p.). It is possible that such a declaration is a joke — one that, like nearly all of his jokes, falls unimpressively flat — but I am inclined to take it at face value for a number of reasons. To start, there is something of an alarmingly earnest, overgrown child in his demeanor as he looms over Dr. Adams, grin delightedly wide, saying, "You know me, I just *adore* card games" (n.p.). Performative as this moment is, it demands a kind of startled trust from the reader, as there does not appear to be anything to gain or lose from such an encounter. Secondly, as Lucy Rollin notes in her analysis of space in *Arkham Asylum*, the Joker functions as a kind of psychiatrist to Batman, here initiating an act of psychotherapy (Rollin n.p.). Such a role demands a kind of trust, a quid pro quo exchange, and with the Joker initiating this relationship, coordinating Batman's game of hide-and-seek and misrecognition, I read such a statement as an offering of trust — a trust Batman rejects in his refusal to reciprocate.

This moment of sensory overload is sharply, hauntingly contrasted with two panels that shift the weight of our gaze and those of Batman and the Joker (Fig. 3): McKean plays with perspective, the Joker's clawed fingers seeming to

reach through the panel, shoving a Rorschach card in our face even as the gutter

clips it unevenly. His eye, squinting malevolently over the card's upper corner, is

distorted in a distinctly cinematic way: the panel's focus (as if we viewed it

through a camera) is on the card, the Joker's hand; his face, the acidic blur of his

hair, are out-of-focus, lacking the grossly clear definition of the card and the fin-

gers offering it. The next panel, in which the perspective shifts to position us

Fig. 3: the Joker, Batman, and the Rorschach card.

just over the Joker's shoulder (and thankfully, not directly from his point of view),

to stare at the Batman's face, or where his face should be. What we see instead —

a view I am inclined to interpret as unfiltered through another character's lens —

is the obliterating black of his mask, the tall protruding horns of his "ears"[8]; there

is no evidence of a face and certainly nothing to suggest Batman even *can* see the

offered card. Instead, we are left with the disturbing thought that his inability to

see — intentional or not — isolates him from the context of sanity, making him

more like those who haunt the Asylum's labyrinthine passages.

Of course, he *can* see the Rorschach card, and Morrison and McKean use

the page-turn beautifully to present a nightmarish, hyperrealistic rendering of the

bat he sees, positioned in much the same way as Frank Miller and David Mazzuc-

chelli had each rendered the creature inspiring Batman's declaration that "I shall

become a bat" (Miller, Janson, and Varley 26) (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis

22) (Fig. 4-6). Like Miller and Mazzucchelli's panels, the wings are spread, the

fanged mouth opened wide; the bat seems to burst through the page, much as

theirs burst violently through windowpanes.[9] To readers of Batman comics in

1989, the parallels would have been obvious, and their intent equally so: Morrison

and McKean anchor their work in the characterization that would have then been

the accepted, dominant interpretation of Batman. Miller was the creator responsi-

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[8] There is something almost cathedral-like about McKean's design of Batman's cowl; the rising ears over the almost perfectly regular shape of his head make me think of Notre-Dame, and given Morrison's own direction at the presence of ecclesiastical architecture through the graphic novel, I am inclined to think that I am meant to interpret it this way. Of course, this raises further parallels to Batman's psyche as a building much like the Asylum itself, and supports Morrison/McKean's subsequent association of Batman-as-Christ figure (n.p., 31-32).

[9] It is clear throughout *Arkham Asylum* that Morrison and McKean are both drawing heavily from Miller's iterations of Batman and his origin; the pearl motif of *The Dark Knight Returns* (24) is echoed hauntingly in McKean's collages, as Miller's violent, homophobic, borderline-psychotic characterization is echoed in Morrison's script.

ble for legitimizing Batman in the mainstream culture with *The Dark Knight Returns*, and ushering in a new era for the character in *Year One*. As Singer argues, Morrison is indeed performing an intervention on this iteration of Batman, who is plagued with psychological sexual anxieties relating to misogyny and homophobia. I would argue that in addition to examining these anxieties, Morrison is interrogating Batman's very sanity, and the pseudo-celebration of its almost pathological absence articulated in Miller's character-defining works.

Fig. 4, left: the *Arkham Asylum* bat
Fig. 5, top right: the *Dark Knight Returns* bat
Fig. 6, bottom right: the *Batman: Year One* bat

This interrogation of Batman's sanity is articulated in three ways: the visual patterns of the comic, which distinguishes him visually from other characters, and verbally through Saladino's distinctive lettering; the narrative's participation in, as Leslie J. Anderson argues, the cyclical nature of Batman's mythology; and,

finally, through an implicitly Foucauldian approach to sanity through self-recognition — an approach which Batman violently refuses.

My previous analysis centered on the main characters visually represented as being able to see, and concluded that that representation enabled them to act as stable, implicitly rational investigators into Batman's psyche. Batman himself is notably absent from the ranks of the sighted characters. Given Batman's popular status as the embodiment of absolute rationality, a figure with a Holmesian reliance on ironclad logic, the lack of visual signifiers associating him with the established "stable" characters makes him an immediately suspicious figure. In his own words, he "[doesn't] see anything" (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino n.p.). McKean's design of Batman seems to shove his sightlessness, which after the word association test performed by Adams takes on a disturbingly willfulness, in the reader's face: it is impossible not to notice the ill-defined shadow that impenetrably shrouds Batman.

Equally impossible to ignore are Saladino's choices in lettering *Arkham Asylum.* Typically, comic book lettering, especially that representing speech, is printed in black on a white background, or "air," which is outlined in black.[10] Letterers are known to change styles and colors to represent specific characters — Clayton Cowles, for example, followed in the Marvel tradition of drawing on cal-

[10] For a useful introduction to the role of comic book lettering, see Shea Hennum's short essay, "Slicing Up Sound Effects, I Want You to Know," in the back matter of *Shutter* #7, by Joe Keatinge (w) and Leila del Duca (a), from Image Comics in December 2014.

ligraphic influences when lettering *Journey Into Mystery* (2012), and the lettering

performed on *Saga* by Fonografiks freely plays with font color depending on the

character in question. Saladino personalizes his lettering to an extent I have not

seen replicated in Western mainstream comics: while Gordon, Adams, Cavendish,

and a number of background characters who have perhaps one or two lines, are

given the traditional black font/white bubble lettering, the inmates Batman en-

counters through his tour of the house are not. Maxie Zeus is represented through

electric-blue bubbles and Greek-inspired font, fitting their delusions of electric

godhood (n.p.). Clayface's dialogue is uneven, sickly, the color an unhealthy yel-

lowed-white, the shape reminiscent of bacteria under a microscope, appropriate

for a character described as "an avatar of filth and corruption, the personification

of pestilence and infection, whose impure touch carries instant contagion[;] as

AIDS on two legs" (36). The Joker's words splatter across the page like blood,

dripping red, unconfined by a speech bubble or a panel gutter. Batman, on the

other hand, is verbally represented as the inversion of the traditional speech bub-

ble: in black air with a white border and white, normative font (n.p.). Contextual-

ized with similarly alternative letterings throughout the Asylum, I read Saladino's

lettering (made apparently without Morrison's direction, as none exists in the an-

notated script) as a second step towards removing Batman from the normalcy of

rationality we are accustomed to expecting from him, and positioning him among

the Asylum's inmates as their peer and equal. (One almost expects the inmates to

shout "One of us!" at the end, in a horrifying homage to Tod Browning's 1931

film, *Freaks.*)

The present day inmates are not the only ones positioned as Batman's

peers. As Batman moves through the Asylum into his own trauma, Morrison re-

lates the history of the Asylum and of Amadeus Arkham, the Asylum's founder,

weaving the two together in an inescapable cycle. Under Morrison's direction, the

past haunts the present, as we would expect — the ghost of Arkham's madness

infecting Dr. Cavendish and instigating the whole terrible evening — but the nar-

rative present also haunts the past. Arkham discovers, inexplicably, a Joker card in

his daughter's bedroom, like the playing cards the Joker of Batman's era leaves at

the scene of his crimes, and hears "hysterical *laughter* from a cell [he knows] to

be empty" (n.p.). The Joker's temporal haunting is paralleled in turn by the pres-

ence of a terrifying demon-Bat, which, Morrison explains, is an embodiment of

"Batman's rage and confusion [echoing] back through time to haunt the past and

send [the Arkhams] right around the bend into mythic reality" (56). The Bat,

drawn by McKean, takes on a more sinister quality, as the coiling epaulets charac-

teristic of his shadowy Batman are replicated with the recognition of the Bat — as

are the horn-like ears, the sweep of the cape (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: the Bat that haunts the Arkham family. In the print edition, the right half of the image is on the page-turn, precluding the reader from comparing the two directly. However, the digital edition allows the reading that the Bat is implicated both in madness and in murder, and clarifies the visual connection between the primordial Bat and the present-day Batman.

Crucially, the visual introduction of the Bat-spirit is articulated through the language of sight and recognition:

> ELIZABETH ARKHAM: It's here! It's *here!*
> ARKHAM: Mother, please, there's *nothing!*
> ARKHAM [capt.]: And why am I so AFRAID? […] Beneath the bed, great wings begin to beat. I am not mad.
> ELIZABETH ARKHAM: See? There? It's *come* for me!
> ARKHAM [capt.]: I am not mad. But God help me, I SEE it. I see the thing that has haunted and tormented my poor mother these long years. I SEE it. And it is a BAT. **A BAT!** [*sic*] (n.p.)

The recognition of the Bat is succeeded by the recognition of Arkham's own madness: that he murdered his mother, that he has inherited her insanity. "Madness is born in the blood," he thinks. "It is my birthright. My inheritance. My destiny" (n.p.).

Significantly, this moment of revelation is preceded by a desperate search

for self-recognition, as Arkham uncovers a mirror he'd previously taped over in

an effort to assure himself of the stability of his world. "I must see my REFLEC-

TION, to prove I still EXIST," he says: "Desperately, I peel the tape from the mir-

ror, breaking my fingernails, strip by strip. Until I stand revealed in the glass. And

I stare into old familiar eyes" [*sic*] (n.p.). The eyes in question are, by implication,

his mother's: by seeing himself in the mirror, he recognizes the legacy of madness

he has inherited from her, which brings us to the third argument against Batman's

sanity.

Though Morrison makes no mention of Michel Foucault when explaining

the numerous psychological allusions and influences in *Arkham Asylum,* the scene

described above reads as though it were taken directly from Foucault's *Madness*

and Civilization. Foucault's body of work identifies means of regulating social

bodies — an approach I myself have adopted in this thesis by examining the

means through which Batman exerts control over Gotham City. Describing the

second of three treatments practiced by Philippe Pinel, who worked prolifically at

the eighteenth century asylums Bicêtre and Salpêtrière, Foucault writes that, when

the aptly-named "Recognition by Mirror" is executed correctly,

> the madman recognizes himself as in a mirror in this madness
> whose absurd pretensions he has denounced; his solid sovereignty
> as a subject dissolves in this object he has demystified by accept-
> ing it. He is now pitilessly observed by himself. And in the silence
> of those who represent reason, and who have done nothing but
> hold up the perilous mirror, he recognizes himself as objectively
> mad. (153-154)

The ultimate effect of Pinel's treatments is to reestablish the "homogenous rule of morality" by eliminating any deviant (amoral) behaviors; recognition is intended to enable the madman to recognize himself as different, irregular, oppositional to society (149). In *Arkham Asylum,* Arkham is able to hold the mirror himself, to recognize his own madness and, though not able to claw his way back to reason, accordingly able to create safeguards to contain the mad legacy of the Bat, resolving to "surround [the presences that roam these rooms and narrow stairways] with bars and walls and electrified fences and pray they never break free" (Morrison, McKean, and Saladino n.p.). On a less literal level, the Asylum functions as a mirror would; as Morrison wryly notes, the Mad Hatter helpfully explains the book when he says that "Arkham is a *looking glass.* And *we* are *you*" (n.p.). The entire reason for Batman to enter the Asylum, the impetus for the narrative itself, is to confront the potentiality of his own madness — and yet Batman violently refuses to do so.

The process of confrontation is initiated through psychiatric mechanisms; as Rollin points out, the Joker becomes something of a "psychiatrist, at one point even giving [Batman] a Rorschach test," and thus initiates Batman's struggle through the Asylum, acting as "a kind of perverse healer, a Dantean guide into the underworld of the asylum and of Batman's mind" (Rollin n.p.). The Rorschach test, as previously discussed, recreates the moment of becoming as identified by

Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Year One,* inextricably linking Batman's

constructed selfhood to the same psychological apparatuses employed to regulate

the mentally deviant inmates of the Asylum. Adams' subsequent word-association

exam, through which McKean's collage work recreates Martha Wayne's broken

string of pearls and the gun responsible for Batman's parents' deaths, similarly

ties Batman's trauma to Miller's earlier recreations of the trauma, and likewise

couches his reaction to it in psychiatric mechanisms. Both of these instances con-

clude with a refusal to see. At the Rorschach-bat, Batman tells the Joker that he

sees nothing, while Adams' word-association test seems to break some crucial

barrier he has constructed over the years: The scene ends with Batman bent over,

avoiding everyone's gazes, whispering "Stop" (n.p.). Saladino's lettering in this

panel is crucial: the "stop," in diminutive plain white font, is all but drowned in

the disproportionately large black bubble.

These moments attest to Batman's refusal to engage with what Foucault

terms "Recognition by Mirror," but by far the most visceral encounter follows

immediately after Batman's flight into the depths of the Asylum. We see him al-

most subsumed into the Asylum's shadowed corridors, distinguished only by his

ears, and undergoing a miserable flashback, reliving a memory of his mother's

admonishment that is visually echoed panels later with his parents' murder. Be-

tween, at the present moment, he seems to have found himself in a hall of mirrors.

The scene calls to mind Arkham's own dream-journey through a mirrored fun-

house that culminates with his fear at the vulval "TUNNEL of LOVE" (n.p.), but also the graphic novel's first page, depicting a twelve-year-old Amadeus "[catching] a glimpse of that OTHER world […] the world of the dark side" (n.p.). Arkham stares at a reflective surface — Morrison describes a "round, convex mirror" (2), but McKean's artistic interpretation makes such a detail impossible to see clearly — into the red-slit eyes of an inhuman face. The face is mirrored almost

Fig. 8 (left); Fig. 9 (right)

exactly to Batman during his own tour of a mirror-hall, and McKean helpfully replicates Arkham's own gaze and reflection in the next, black-and-white panel to emphasize the parallels (Fig. 8-10). Again, the red-slit eyes in the mirror gaze inscrutably at their subject; but unlike Arkham's fearful recognition of the poten-

tiality of his own madness, which I believe is what the mirrored reflections represent, Batman recoils from his mirrored self, and then smashes the mirror, teeth bared in agony (Fig. 11). He refuses his reflection, and the madness it suggests, and in doing so, refuses self-recognition for the entirety of *Arkham Asylum*. *"I'm sick?"* Cavendish cries incredulously when confronting Batman and the Asylum's Bat. "Have *you* looked in a mirror lately? *Have you?"* (n.p.). Of course, Batman hasn't, and that's the entire point: he refuses to even entertain the notion that he could be as fallible and as unstable as any of the Asylum's inmates.

Fig. 10 (left); Fig. 11 (right)

In a way, his reasons for doing so — or the violence of his refusal to do so — make perfect sense. Within the Batman comics of the era, and subsequent decades, Batman is established as a regulator of deviance within Gotham City; he engages specifically those who behave "crazily" or act in opposition to Gotham's

society by, for example, plotting to poison the city's reservoir or conduct human trafficking or organize the drug trade into a single operation. Granted, none of these things are good for the city, and they should be prevented from occurring, but in many ways Batman is no better. He is unquestionably guilty of child endangerment, responsible for untold millions in damages to the city, and culpable in the organized crime syndicates he condemns as he manipulates them from afar. But recognition of this, or even of the more subtle fact that he is, mentally and performatively, as deviant as the villains he ostensibly regulates through the existing institutions of the police and the asylum, would completely destabilize not only the entire construction of the Batman mythos, but Batman's fundamental raison d'être within the mythos. The very idea of Batman depends completely on the simple identification of Batman as "good" and his opponents as "bad;" if his opponents are insane, and compelled by their insanity to commit evil, then Batman must *not* be insane, otherwise the equation as written would collapse. Thus, Batman has established a relative normalcy predicated upon the acceptance of a certain degree of abnormality — that of a vigilante who dresses like a bat, for example — in order to not only assure Gotham of his own relative stability, but to justify his role as an institution unto himself, hypocritically dedicated to regulating the deviance of others. In this way, *Arkham Asylum* problematizes the treatment of mental illness within Batman comics, and implicitly criticizes the longstanding editorial edict demanding Batman's sanity.

II. Conclusion

Geoff Klock notes, "Every major member of the villain's gallery operates

as a kind of reflection of some aspect of Batman's personality or role so that an

understanding of one of the villains always sheds light on Batman himself":

> Mr. Freeze points out the dark side of Bruce Wayne's utter lack of emotion as Batman. The shape-shifter, Clayface, suggests the anti-essential nature of the Batman/Bruce Wayne relationship, both of which are seen as personae […] Poison Ivy uses criminal activity (and Batman's vigilante status is, of course, illegal) for a good cause, ecology. The Scarecrow, whose entire existence is devoted to fear, recalls that the intention of the Batman persona is the edge provided by terror. […] The Riddler parodies Batman's role as the great detective. Man-Bat provides another example of a Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation that, like Batman, only emerges at night. The Ventriloquist questions, in terms of split personality, who is the puppet and who is the puppeteer. Under this schema, any understanding of the Joker — violent, insane, or sexually deviant — will reflect an aspect of Batman. (Klock 123).

How else, then, are we to take the roster of Batman's villains but as a list of psy-

choses and neuroatypicalities that he is editorially forbidden to have? And what

does the outlawing of Batman's insanity or potential thereof accomplish?

Frustratingly, it is difficult to come to any concrete conclusions regarding

Batman's sanity; editorial edicts are absolute in superhero comics, and while indi-

vidual creators may author challenges to such edicts, Batman officially must be

sane. However, *Arkham Asylum* engages in an understanding of Batman grounded

in the doubt of his sanity and stability, and in doing so, complicates the otherwise

uncomplicated relationship between madness and criminality in the 1986-2011

Gotham City. There is little of value to be gained from a sane, stoic figure enacting physical and institutional violence against the mentally ill in order to elucidate his own character, other than a discourse on the exploitation of marginalized populations in superhero comics. However, a Batman who is, to borrow from Foucault's articulation of Pinel's psychiatric practices, as different and as irregular as the rogues he fights is another matter entirely. In this light, any understanding of the Batman mythos must realize the chilling truth of the Joker's parting words in *Arkham Asylum:* "Enjoy yourself out there," he says, sketched unsettlingly in the same pencil with which McKean drew Gordon, "[in] the Asylum" (n.p.). If this is the case, then Batman is the adjudicator of irregularity, as well as the standard to which crime-fighters must be held. He is the architect and warden of circles of confinement designed to entrap those as deviant as himself.

CHAPTER THREE:
"Cross the line": Justice and the Batman

For understandable reasons, the majority of scholarship on Batman media

tends to focus on Batman himself. After all, he is the black-clad star of Gotham

City, who, as I have argued in my preceding chapters, exerts significant control

over its social and judicial infrastructure. In this chapter, I examine Batman's role

as a perceived agent of justice. Other critics writing on Batman's tempestuous re-

lationship with justice as an ideal have, in my opinion quite reasonably, concluded

that Batman is no better than a totalitarian icon, "effectively operate[ing] like a

fire-and-brimstone Old Testament God, a vengeful God seeking draconian jus-

tice" (Brie 208). After all, one cannot convincingly argue that what Batman seeks

is justice for his parents' murders; their killer, Joe Chill, suffers an alarming vari-

ety of fates,[1] but all of them have offered a degree of finality that render any spe-

cific effort on Batman's part to "bring him to justice" redundant. Instead, as Steve

Brie argues based on both *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: The*

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[1] Various writers in various story lines have provided any number of endings for Joe Chill — from arrest and imprisonment, to murder at the hands of Gotham's mob families, to suicide from intense guilt after killing the Waynes.

Killing Joke, "Batman's vision of justice becomes blurred as he develops an ob-

sessive desire to personally institute a biblical form of retribution against Gotham

City's criminal underclass" (207). To put it simply, the lines dividing the concepts

of justice and revenge are blurred nearly from the beginning of the Batman.

Usually in this discussion, the unanswered question of the Joker is raised:

given the assumption of Batman's authority as nearly absolute, why is he still

alive, or at least, why hasn't Batman found some more effective solution? After

all, if Batman is earnest in his endeavor to protect the citizens of Gotham City,

Arkham Asylum is demonstrably incapable of confining the Joker, and the Joker

has, by Brie's count, killed more than 2,000 people[2] (211) and has every intention

of killing thousands more, logic demands that his methodology be adjusted, at the

very least. Yet the Joker remains gleefully, diabolically, homicidally alive, for rea-

sons that extend beyond DC Comics' commercial impetus. While various meta-

textual arguments have been made regarding the Joker's continued survival,[3] no

satisfying answer has been articulated within the Batman canon save that Batman

does not kill, and therefore, the Joker must return to Arkham Asylum, only to

break out days or months later and endanger the city again. As Michael Nichols

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[2] To be precise, Brie's tally encompasses the Joker's murders since 1940, when he was introduced in *Batman* #1. During the course of 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns,* however, Brie estimates that the Joker kills more than 600 Gothamites.

[3] Michael Nichols argues in his essay on Batman, the Joker, and the combat myth, that together they enact a mythic conflict millennia in the making (236), and seem fated by both mythic tension and corporate design to perpetuate that conflict as long as they both exist in the popular imagination. A second analysis, useful in my own argument, is Michael Smith's reflection on the Joker's nature and relationship to Evil.

and Michael Smith suggest, albeit in different contexts, Batman and the Joker are embroiled in an eternal, cyclical conflict as agents of order and chaos, never to be freed.

However, this is not to say that there has been no effort to break this conflict between Batman and the Joker, though neither instigate that effort. Rather, that effort came from Jason Todd, the second Robin. Brutally murdered by the Joker, Jason is resurrected in what can only be described as a cosmic absurdity,[4] and at once begins executing a piercing interrogation, grounded in his own experiences and traumas, of Batman's system of justice, especially where it concerns marginalized populations and the Joker. While the interrogation of Batman's judicial methodology posed by Jason is not the only one articulated in the Bat-mythos, I will argue that it is the most prolific challenge to said methodology.

In this chapter, I break with the methodology of my previous chapters, which focused on a single comic to reveal specific constructions governing the Bat-mythos. Here, I focus on the character of Jason Todd, whose narratives span many different comics, and who reveals and critiques the structure of the mythos from within. Before directly engaging with Jason, I will contextualize the judicial apparatus, as exemplified in the case of both the Joker and Batman, using Michael Smith's reflection on the Joker's relationship to "Evil" and Michel Foucault's es-

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[4] Superboy Prime punched the universe, and Jason Todd came back to life. I advise against trying to make sense of that causality.

say on punishment and the "dangerous individual." Finally, I will address Jason

himself, and the two narratives he is given to indict Batman's approach to justice,

revenge, and punishment. I argue that, in the context of the perspectives offered

by Foucault and Smith, Jason poses a challenge to Batman's judicial institution

from within the mythology. Though ultimately unsuccessful, this challenge is sig-

nificant in that it attempts to hold Batman accountable for his system and its fail-

ings, in a mythos that otherwise privileges Batman's system of justice — and his

systems of masculinity and sanity — over any and every challenge.

I. "Along the Edges": Batman, the Joker, and Vigilante Justice

It is virtually impossible to understand the character of the Joker. Even the

text most credited with defining his character, Alan Moore's and Brian Bolland's

Batman: The Killing Joke (1988), offers only hypotheticals: "Something like that

[a terrible trauma] happened to *me*, you know," the Joker tells Batman. "I...I'm

not exactly *sure* what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes an-

other...If I'm going to have a *past*, I prefer it to be *multiple choice*!" (Moore and

Bolland n.p.). Generally, this statement is taken as evidence that the origin story

offered by Moore and Bolland is a subjective memory,[5] one that cannot be trusted

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[5] This particular perspective, to which I now adhere, was argued to me by Greg Rucka
(Personal Interview).

— much like the Joker himself.[6] While practically every other comic book super-

hero or villain has an origin story that succinctly explains who they have become

— Batman's parents were killed by a mugger, Two-Face was a brilliant district

attorney until an attack by the mob disfigured him and triggered a psychological

break, for example — no such explanation exists concretely for the Joker.[7] Ac-

cordingly, he is unknowable, incomprehensible: there is no explanation for him,

his crimes, or his motivation.

This, Michael Smith argues, is as it should be. Borrowing from Claude

Lanzmann, director of the 1985 Holocaust documentary *Shoah*,[8] Smith suggests

that

> those who attempt to make sense of evil, to examine it and quanti-
> fy it, to understand it, and review its history and somehow explain
> it, must eventually end up justifying it, excusing it. And evil *cannot*
> be excused — otherwise, it is not evil; it is human, and so, we
> might forgive it. [...] That is why evil must remain Other. It must
> be forever outside, supernatural, and inexplicable. (198)

For Smith, the Joker must be unexplainable because he is Evil-with-a-capital-E.

Any kind of concrete logic to his being — he is *x* because of *y* — would obscure

the thousands of deaths he has caused by suggesting the Joker's personhood

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[6] *The Killing Joke* was originally published as a 46-page graphic novel; however, over-whelming fan response encouraged DC Comics to fold it into the main continuity of Batman narratives. The Joker's first criminal identity as the Red Hood takes on a horrify-ing significance after Jason Todd's resurrection.

[7] It should be noted that fan practice is to take *The Killing Joke* at face value — as the definitive origin.

[8] Smith elegantly offers a comparison between the Joker's crimes and the Holocaust in his essay.

could, under the right circumstances, after "one bad day," be ours as well (Moore and Bolland n.p.). With the right trauma, any one of us could become agents of injustice, of chaos, and so it is essential that we refuse knowledge of the Joker's history. We cannot be allowed to empathize with him.

This inability to "know" the Joker creates another problem. How does one — or, in the Batman case, the Dynamic Duo and the Gotham City judicial apparatus — deal with such a figure? As the long history of conflicts between Batman and the Joker demonstrate, catching the Joker isn't the hard part. The difficulty lies in what to do once he's been caught. In his essay on the concept of the "Dangerous Individual," Michel Foucault addresses this very problem. Citing the case of a man accused of multiple rapes and attempted rapes, he lays out the basic structure of the judicial system, and how it becomes horrifyingly impotent in the face of an unknown:

> Here we have a judicial system designed to establish misdemeanors, to determine who committed them, and to sanction these acts by imposing the penalties prescribed by the law. In this case we have facts which have been established, an individual who admits to them and who consequently accepts the punishment he will receive. All should be for the best in the best of all possible judicial worlds. [...] And yet it happens that the machinery jams, the gears seize up. Why? Because the accused remains silent, [evading] a question which is essential in the eyes of a modern tribunal [...] : "Who are you?" (1)

Foucault uses this case as an example to prove his larger point: that somewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as psychiatry pried its way into the courts

(5), the distinction between a person who committed a crime and a criminal collapsed. Criminality then became something of an infectious agent in society, requiring action to prevent its spread: it posed a danger to the very infrastructure of civilization (2), one that is realized in the accused's silence. As in the above case, the necessary identification of one's self *as criminal,* not merely as guilty of a crime, is denied, and thus no 'treatment' can be prescribed:

> Now that the reason for the crime has become the reason for the punishment, how could one punish if the crime was without reason? In order to punish, one needs to know the nature of the guilty person, his obduracy, the degree of his evilness, what his interests or leanings are. But if one has nothing more than the crime on one hand and the author on the other, pure and simple judicial responsibility formally authors punishment, yet does not allow one to make sense of it. (9)

It would seem that we cannot pass judgment or a sentence; and this is the problem of the Joker. We cannot know him, because he defies narrative even as he is created by it; we cannot condemn him simply as one who has committed a crime, nor as a criminal, as the scope of his evil, to return to Smith, surpasses both. His motivation is a mystery, his crimes innumerable and absolutely devastating, and so he eternally escapes both punishment and confinement.[9]

Troublingly, much the same argument can be made for Batman himself: though he is one of the most recognizable superheroes, and his origin story has

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[9] At a certain point, one would expect this philosophy to stop mattering: the Joker has killed and wounded thousands of people, and clearly poses a danger to society regardless of whether or not one understands why he kills (or whether or not there even *is* a why). But this is a superhero narrative aspiring to mythic proportions, and at a certain point one must stop expecting a realist response.

been remade and replayed countless times, the man himself is something of an enigma, and not just because he represents a nearly unimaginable power fantasy or an unapproachable model of justice. Despite our knowledge of his orphaning, and his all but uninterrupted narration, we know exceptionally little about Bruce Wayne as an individual; what little he has to say is unwaveringly focused on his mission. He does not acknowledge his own interiority, and therefore it is, without venturing into the realm of guesswork, impossible for us to acknowledge as well. By the schema proposed by Foucault and applied to the Bat-mythos, even recognition of Batman's actions as bordering on criminal (if not crossing into that realm entirely) cannot offer any kind of judicial relief. He is curiously empty, a vessel into which the fantasies, fears, and aspirations of Gothamites and comic fans alike can be poured, unknowable even without the cape and the cowl. He cannot be held accountable for his actions, as there is practically no self to hold accountable. In this way, Batman's conflicting constructions of selfhood are the true mask.

II. "But It Was Right": Justice, Punishment, and Jason Todd

Jason Todd is unique in the Batman mythos, though not because he died and was resurrected. Rather, he is unique because he has one of the most fully realized and complete narratives of anyone in Gotham, one that has a beginning, middle, and end comprised of four story arcs: *Batman* #408-425, "The Second Robin"; *Batman* #426-429, "A Death in the Family"; *Red Hood: The Lost Days*;

and *Batman: Under the Red Hood.* Unlike Batman and the Joker both, Jason is

exquisitely explicated in these narratives. We are given intimate knowledge of his

motivations and his experiences prior to and during his tenure as a self-appointed

judge, jury and executioner for Gotham's more hardened criminals, and so cannot

either designate him as Evil nor condemn him as criminal, according to the terms

that Smith and Foucault respectively argue. It is too easy to understand his per-

spective, and thus excuse — or at least express ambivalence about — the actions

resulting from that perspective. But, unlike Batman and the Joker, Jason *can* be

punished for the dangers he poses to the established system of justice in Gotham

City — and, tragically, he is.

"The Second Robin" arc introduces Jason as an orphan, squatting in an

abandoned apartment in Crime Alley — where Batman's parents were gunned

down years before. He steals the tires from the Batmobile, and escapes Batman,

shouting "Try and catch me, you big boob!" (Collins, Warner, and DeCarlo 18).

Batman does catch him, securing the return of his tires, but is struck by Jason's

situation: living alone, having lost his parents to crime and drug addiction, at-

tempting to live honorably. "I don't wanna learn to be no crook," Jason says: "I

just boost what it takes to survive" (Collins, Andru, and Giordano 15). Batman's

zero-tolerance policy regarding crime of any kind leads him to attempt to correct

Jason's illegal activities by adopting Jason as Bruce Wayne's ward, and training

him as the second Robin, the successor to Dick Grayson. Jason is an apt pupil,

capable and dedicated to the principles that Batman ostensibly represents: of helping those in need, of getting the bad guys and stopping them from hurting anyone else. However, Jason is quickly faced with the failure of Batman's system, as Batman is unable to stop a serial rapist and murderer from killing nearly a dozen women, and unwilling to intervene in the case of a young woman raped repeatedly by a diplomat's son.

I believe it necessary at this juncture to introduce an analysis of Jason Todd written and informally published by a fan, in fan spaces, for a fan audience. Since there is next to no formal analysis of Jason Todd — I have found only three published mentions of him, none of which are useful for my own analysis — Kitty Burroughs' twenty-six-page manifesto, cited here with permission, is invaluable. Burroughs persuasively traces the character development of Jason across nearly every one of his appearances, crafting an argument that brings his unspoken and implicit traumas horrifyingly into the light. Essentially, Burroughs argues that there is an alarming pile of implicit evidence that Jason suffered sexual abuse in the form of juvenile prostitution before Batman took him under his cape, likely in an effort to care for his terminally ill and drug-addicted mother:

> If Jason was pushed into prostitution to care for himself and his mother, he would have been intimately familiar with the holes in the justice system, as well as the shame associated with hooking — especially for men. [...] In that light, Jason's attitude and triggers make a painful amount of sense.

Burroughs also expands upon the prevalent fan theory that Jason is not heterosex-

ual, building upon the massive amount of textual evidence inserted into the later

narratives in spite of the fact that, as writer Judd Winick says, DC does not allow

comment on Jason's potential bisexuality (qtd. Burroughs).[10] The shame and

trauma she hypothesizes Jason experienced, and for which she makes a tragically

compelling case, likely only exacerbated his feelings, sexual or otherwise, for

Batman:

> Personally, I do think that Jason was in love with Bruce—that as
> screwed up as he was, Bruce became the lightning rod for every-
> thing positive in Jason. He was the first stranger to truly give a
> crap about him, and so Jason desperately latched onto the idea of
> him as father-mentor-partner. If those feelings were ever sexual in
> nature, they would have rebounded on Jason, doubling back and
> turning into shame.

I find Burroughs' analysis persuasive. Following her reading, Jason's reactions to

not only sexual violence but to his perceived betrayal by Batman, which I will

address shortly, can clearly be traced to an emotional and sexual vulnerability,

which causes Jason to react to any threat against either with an aggressive defen-

siveness. Jason is, as Burroughs points out, most affected by violence — especial-

ly sexual violence — against women; while Bruce is grim and regretful that he

was unable to prevent a rape, Jason is frantic, desperate, aching for action, a way

to stop things from happening. Stumbling across a pimp beating up a sex worker,

Jason immediately gets between the two, using the skills he has honed as Robin:

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[10] Unlike speculation over Batman's sexuality, Jason's sexuality is assumed queer by
fans, and is more or less ignored (much like the character himself) by academia. DC's
attitude towards Jason's potential queerness likely follows from the decades of Batman
debates, though (like Batman) a great deal of evidence supports queer readings of Jason.

"Can't seem to *handle* anyone but *women,* can you?" he shouts, knocking the pimp to the ground. "How do you like being on the receiving end for a change?!" (Starlin, Bright, and Rubenstein 15).

Jason's attitudes persist through the end of the issue, during which time the sister of one of the serial killer's victims kills the serial killer. "Good luck finding a jury to convict me," Judy Koslosky tells Gordon and Batman: "I *didn't* kill a *man.* I *put down* a *mad dog"* (21.4-21.7). When Batman relates this to Jason after, quoting her belief that "It might *not* have been *legal*...but it was *right*" (22.1), Jason agrees — much to Batman's shock and horror. But taking Burroughs' hypothesis into account, one can understand how Jason would come to this conclusion. Batman not only is unable to stop the serial killer, but also jeopardizes the investigation's chain of custody, making the killer's weapon of choice inadmissible in the Gotham courts and rendering that infrastructure even more ineffectual than usual. Batman, then, becomes an impediment not only to justice, but to the protection of Gothamites, while Jason is left a helpless witness, unable to intervene under either the existing criminal justice system or Batman's vigilante justice.

Not long after this exchange, Jason and Batman encounter another rape case: a diplomat's son, Felipe Garzonas, with the immunity conferred by his father's position, repeatedly kidnaps and rapes a young woman, Gloria Stanson. Since neither vigilantes nor civil authorities are able to prevent him from making

another attack, Gloria commits suicide rather than be raped again (Starlin, Bright, and Mitchell). After finding her body, Jason makes for Felipe's home; by the time Batman catches up to him, Felipe has fallen fatally from his balcony to the pavement several stories below. What exactly transpires between Jason's arrival and Batman's is never made clear; when asked, Jason says he simply fell, startled by Jason's sudden arrival, but there are two panels of silence before the answer (Fig. 1, right). I interpret this sequence, in which Jason is the only moving figure, as a crucial moment for him. Whatever did happen to Felipe, one

Fig. 1: Jason after Felipe's fall.

distinctly senses that Batman has already made up his mind about the boy who survived for years in Crime Alley, and has already written him off as criminal in this scene (21). Accordingly, I read this scene as one in which Jason realizes that not only is Batman's approach to justice severely and inflexibly flawed when it comes to protecting individuals, but that it equates all those who commit crimes, regardless of motive or the crime's severity. From Batman's perspective, and in Jason's experience, whatever involvement Jason may have had in Felipe's death

makes him *as bad* as the monster who drove a woman to suicide after repeated

rape. Much as Foucault identified nineteenth century courts as doing, Batman

here views the person, Jason, who is accused or guilty of a crime as *defined by*

that crime.

Any hope of more thoroughly investigating this bizarre equation is horri-

fyingly cut short in "A Death in the Family." Jason embarks on a quest to find his

birth mother, who lures him into a trap set by the Joker in "A Death in the

Family." Jason is kidnapped, beaten nearly to death with a crowbar, and then

locked in a warehouse with his mother as a bomb ticks down. Batman arrives too

late to save Jason, and Jason, beaten as he is, is unable to break down the door to

save his mother. Both die, and Jason's ragged Robin costume is memorialized in a

glass case in the Batcave, a visual representation of Batman's greatest failure, and

until 2006, that was the end of Jason Todd.

2006 was the year in which all the dead sidekicks came back to life.

Bucky Barnes, Captain America's pal, was revealed to be a brainwashed, cryo-

genically preserved Soviet assassin; Peter Parker's Uncle Ben temporarily, vil-

lainously returned; and Jason Todd woke in his grave, screaming for Batman to

save him. Before Batman could discover Jason's resurrection, Jason was taken in

by Talia al Ghul, daughter of Batman villain Ra's al Ghul, who in no short order

revealed to him two pieces of information: that the Joker was alive and again at

large, and that Batman had taken on a third Robin. "You remain unavenged,"

Talia tells him, and so sets him on a path of vengeance and heartbreak, the pro-

tagonist of his own revenge tragedy (Winick, Raimondi, and Haun "Baptism").

Already possessing considerable skills from his months as Robin, Jason deter-

mines to complete his education by filling in the gaps, and so spends several years

learning how to do terrible things from terrible people. However, as Talia drily

observes, the "lessons" quickly shift into something else: "I find you a *teacher,*"

she says, "and you *murder* him." Jason looks at her, expression beautifully drawn

by Jeremy Haun, containing the same wariness and reticence he displayed in the

face of Batman's accusations (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2: Jason to Talia, on his theory of justice.
JASON: *"Murder"* sounds a bit fancy. I didn't orchestrate to
whacking him over an *inheritance.* I spiked his *bug juice* because
he was a *dirtbag.* [...] He was a *killer-for-hire* who made *more*
money on a *single* job than *most* people in the world will see in a
lifetime. But he *still* thought he needed *extra cash*, so he kidnapped
children and sold them as *sex toys.* (Winick, Raimondi, and Haun
"School")

Jason's violence here is justified in his eyes because it was the only option: the

system of justice was corrupt, and let hundreds of children slip through the cracks

into slavery. "He had connections to the cops," Jason explains:

> Had a few politicians who he did *work* for. He wasn't gonna get locked up. But he was *greedy*. No lieutenants. Just muscle. The operation ran through *him*. So, if it was going to end, it had to end with *him*. I didn't *"murder"* him. You murder *people*. I...*put this reptile down*. Don't *tell me* the world isn't better off. ("School")

There is a striking similarity to Judy Koslosky's logic here: "I didn't *kill* a *man*. I *put down* a *mad dog*." While I think a case can be argued that Jason, as in the above passage, commits the same Foucauldian fallacy of equating the criminal with the crime, I don't believe that Jason does so in quite the same way. In a way, he demands a deeper knowledge of the criminal he judges: does he commit a crime because he needs to survive? Who gets hurt in the process of that crime? Motivation is key for Jason in a way that it is not for Batman, as is circumstance. If another just force can intervene, Jason is demonstrably ready to help: he delivers the kidnapped children to the British Embassy, and sets a trap for mercenary soldiers with those keeping the peace in Somalia. If not, he takes matters into his own hands. Michael Smith, writing on the Joker, wryly suggests that one interpretation of the character's mysterious motivations is that "someone must *play* that role [of villain], and since [the Joker] recognizes that someone *must* play it, *he* will be the one to play it" (199). One could draw a parallel to Jason: since someone must intervene, must be judge, jury, and, if needed, executioner, and no one else is stepping up, it may as well be him. He has made himself the figure he needed as a child, someone who not only recognizes the systemic inadequacies of

Gotham's judicial system, but who actively moves beyond its purview to effect immediate, long-lasting change. He has become, in Talia al Ghul's words, "the man [Bruce Wayne] can *never* be [...] the Batman that Gotham *needs*. No *boundaries* or *allegiances* or self-important *moral codes*": the man willing to "cross the line" (Winick, Raimondi, and Haun "Benediction and Commencement").

III. "Cross the Line": Batman on Trial

Jason eventually returns to Gotham, considering himself prepared to face Batman and the Joker and to enact his system of justice upon them. "I realized this *isn't* about *him* [the Joker]" he tells Talia. "It isn't even about *Bruce*. Or me. It's about the *three* of us. When this ends — *however* it ends — that's how it'll be. *Me*, that *psycho*...and *Batman*" (Winick, Raimondi, and Haun "Benediction and Commencement"). Accordingly, Jason abducts the Joker and arranges for Batman to find them both, staging a confrontation that doubles as a trial in which Jason is the plaintiff, judge, and jury.[11]

This is a crucial moment for several reasons. First, it is the narrative climax of *Batman: Under the Red Hood*; second, it is, to my knowledge, the only time in the 1986-2011 continuity in which Batman's vigilante activities are interrogated. Though others before have expressed dissatisfaction with Batman's

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[11] He also works to destabilize the current drug lord, and to control as much organized criminal activity as possible.

methods — most notably Dr. Leslie Thompkins, a family friend to the Waynes

and a lifelong pacifist — Jason Todd in *Under the Red Hood* is the only person

who is allowed not only to criticize these methods, but also to demand *and receive*

an explanation for them. Not only that, but Jason is the only one who gets away

with it: Batman can't banish him from Gotham, as he does Dr. Thompkins, be-

cause Jason neither recognizes his authority nor wants his blessing to stay, nor can

he really terrify Jason into compliance, as he does the rest of the criminals he

fights. Having trained under Batman, Jason already knows all the tricks of the

trade, not to mention the skills he has since gained; furthermore, Jason holds the

ultimate trump card. He knows Batman's secret identity and is unafraid to use that

information. Effectively, Batman has no choice but to stand trial for Jason in

Crime Alley, to grant Jason a stage from which to challenge him — even if his

guilt from Jason's first death did not demand he listen.

It is Batman's guilt that facilitates the conflict: Batman is paralyzed once

he realizes that his opponent is his former Robin, able to neither arrest Jason's

own extreme vigilantism, nor condone it. Instead, he is fixed helplessly between

the two until the final scene. "I know I failed you," he tells Jason, expression

grim, cape in ghostly tatters at his shoulders. "But...I tried to save you, Jason.

I'm...I'm trying to save you now" (Winick et al. "All They Do is Watch Us Kill,

Part Three: It Only Hurts When I Laugh"). But failing to save Jason from the Jok-

er's crowbar and bomb is not Batman's crime. "Bruce, I forgive you for not sav-

ing me," Jason says, as though that should have been obvious from the beginning, as though there was no question in Jason's mind that Batman, being flawed and human, might not make it in time. The question, the crime, is why Jason was not avenged, and why his killer and the killer of thousands more still cackles in Gotham, ghastly white skin unblemished and toxic green hair perfectly coiffed:

> JASON: Ignoring what he's done in the past. *Blindly,* stupidly, disregarding entire graveyards he's filled, the thousands who have suffered...the friends he's crippled...I thought...I thought killing *me* — that I'd be the last person you'd ever let him hurt. If it had been you that he beat to a bloody mass. If it had been you that he left in agony. If he had taken *you* from this world...I would have done nothing but search the planet for this pathetic pile of death-worshipping garbage...and sent him off to hell.

It is impossible to look at this passage and conclude that Jason is only attempting to avenge his own murder. He is attempting to demonstrate that Batman's inaction in the case of the Joker — refusing to either execute him or to adjust his current

Fig. 3 (left): Jason vs. Batman

methods to prevent him from hurting others — has wounded or ended thousands of lives. But this passage is devastatingly personal as well, as artist Eric Battle illustrates, fixating on Jason's eye, the blood and scars and sugges-

tion of a tear that wells and falls throughout the scene (Fig. 3). As much as Jason

is frustrated by Batman's politics and methodology, he loved, and I believe con-

tinues to love, Batman, the first real father figure he had, the first person who ap-

peared to care for him: Gotham's hero, who believed in him enough to save him

and remake him as Robin. What he seeks in this trial, then, is not only an explana-

tion, but proof that Batman ever loved him and reciprocated Jason's own love for

him. In other words, he seeks evidence of Batman's own interiority, the sense of

self which Batman has so effectively repressed. Accordingly, he puts Batman on

trial, and provides him the opportunity to correct his previous perceived mistake:

of valuing the Joker's life more than Jason's, of adhering to the law instead of jus-

tice or his selfhood.

First, the trial. Jason lists the charges, and Bruce immediately attempts to

explain them away. "You don't understand," he tells Jason. "I don't think you've

ever understood." Crossing the line would "be too damned easy. All I have *ever*

wanted to to do is kill him. [...] But if I do that, if I allow myself to go into that

place...I'll never come back." Jason's response is unusual, and incredibly impor-

tant. Not moving otherwise, he asks a single question: "Why?" (Fig. 4). The panel

is arresting in its stark simplicity; against the dark background, the lettered air

pops, clearly defined and concise. Where previously, Jason talks for panels on end

until the word bubbles themselves practically take over the page, here he is limit-

ed to one word, a single monosyllabic question, completely unanticipated by

Batman. Batman, who had been staring away, eyes downcast, looks up, off-guard,

as if he didn't quite hear Jason or can't believe that he heard him accurately:

"What?"

Fig. 4: Jason demanding another explanation.

> JASON: Why do all the cub scouts in spandex *always* say that? "If
> I cross that line, there's no coming back." I'm not talking about
> killing Cobblepot and Scarecrow or Clayface. Not Riddler or
> Dent...I'm talking about *him.* Just him. And doing it because...be-
> cause he took me away from you. ("All They Do is Watch Us Kill,
> Part Three: It Only Hurts When I Laugh")

Crucially, this monologue, which takes up the rest of the page, only lets Jason

speak, though the panels shift to reflect the bound Joker and silent Batman as his

audience. The critique Jason poses — that not only is Batman's vigilantism inef-

fectual, but that it demands an inflexible callousness, an equation of crime and

perpetrator — is presented in much the same way as the scene Foucault recounts

in "Dangerous Individual." He lists the charges, demands an explanation of Bat-

man's actions, his perspectives, his belief, his dedication to the principles he pur-

ports to serve, and in the face of these accusations, Batman can only stand in silence (Fig. 5, below). He has no answer to give, and so Jason's own attempt at justice and punishment fails. He tries, desperately, to punish Batman by making

him choose between the Joker's life and Jason's, hoping that he will correct the mistake of not punishing the Joker for Jason's death. However, this is a choice Batman refuses to make, seem-

Fig. 5: Batman's silence in the trial.

ing to see neither as more worthy of saving, of loyalty, than the other. Instead, he incapacitates Jason, nearly killing him with a Batarang to the throat and loosing the Joker upon them all once again. Batman preserves his system of justice in an ostensible victory, but it is a Pyrrhic victory at best: he has chosen a mass murderer over his adopted son, and defended a hollow principle over his very selfhood. "I love it," the Joker crows: "You managed to find a way to win...and everybody still *loses*!!" Except, of course, the Joker doesn't lose; he gets to live, and kill people and plant bombs and plot to poison the Gotham Reservoir to his blackened heart's content. In the end, it would seem, nothing is accomplished.

IV. Conclusion

But something *is* accomplished in this scene, made possible through the character of Jason Todd as developed in multiple narratives. The question of the Joker is asked and an answer is attempted; when that answer is deemed unsatisfactory, the question is asked again, because Jason's experiences as Robin and beyond have made him capable of and willing to recognize when systems of justice fail. The climax of *Under the Red Hood* argues, more compellingly and directly than the Frank Miller and Alan Moore comics Steve Brie cites, that "the righteous are not always innocent of the deeds of the wicked" (Brie 213). It does so by first exposing the tension inherent to the Bat-mythos — we can accept that Batman cannot kill, but not why he has done nothing else to contain the Joker; and second, by gathering Batman, the Joker, and Jason Todd together for an attempt at judicial proceedings, thus suggesting that Batman shares culpability for the Joker's actions and demanding he be accountable for the flaws in his system of justice.

But neither Batman nor the Joker are, nor can they be, held accountable or judged: both stay silent in the face of their accusations, Batman unable to repair his methods, and barely willing to acknowledge their flaws, and the Joker untouchable in his evilness. Everyone loses, but Jason, whose background has been explicated in unparalleled detail, who had the nerve to issue a challenge to Batman's system of vigilante justice, is the one who is punished, left to bleed out on Crime Alley. It would seem that there is no justice in Gotham City, no matter the

victim or perpetrator. The crime, the deviation from Batman's established model

of judicial authority, is all that matters.

CODA:
"You Smell Like Feathers, Little Bird":
Dick Grayson and the Legacy of the Batman

In my thesis, I have focused on Batman/Bruce Wayne as someone who, in

both of his performative personas, exerts incredible regulatory power in Gotham

City, constructing models of gender, sanity, and justice which he strictly, and hyp-

ocritically, enforces. As I argued in my second chapter, Wayne's Batman is just as

deviant as the villains he confines, and, as I argued in my first and third chapters,

he has destabilized Gotham City through his individual actions to the extent that

only a relative normality of deviance is possible. However, Bruce Wayne is not

the only one to wear the guise of Batman, and his constrictive regulations of per-

sonhood undergo significant revisions as Dick Grayson, the first Robin, takes up

the cape and cowl upon Bruce Wayne's death.[1] As Dick Grayson, Batman be-

comes a figure far more genuine — that is to say, less performative — than his

predecessor, whose approach to gender, madness and deviance, and justice is al-

most completely alien to that established by Wayne-as-Batman. Scott Snyder,

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[1] Of course, Bruce Wayne did not actually die, but was rather sent back in time, and then rebooted
in September 2011.

Jock, and Francesco Francavilla's *Batman: The Black Mirror* (2011) is a story obsessed with the Batman's institutional legacy, and its creators make a compelling argument for the legacy's inherent instability by repeatedly demonstrating how Dick Grayson breaks with and remakes the precedents set by Wayne's Batman.

One of the first things one notices about *The Black Mirror* is the way in which the ghosts of the past — of Batman's *Year One,* in fact — return to wreak havoc on the narrative's present. The corrupt Lieutenant Flass, who acted as Gordon's foil and chief antagonist throughout *Year One*, reappears through a legacy of his own: an illegal car trading operation he initiated that is dubiously connected to one of Batman's contemporary cases ("The Hungry City, Part 2"). Sonia Branch, née Zucco, is the unwilling inheritor of Anthony Zucco's legacy, which features among its many crimes the murder of Dick Grayson's parents. Missing GCPD evidence resurfaces in the remaking of a number of Gotham's rogues: a boy is injected with an early Killer Croc serum ("The Black Mirror, Part 1"); the

Fig. 1: James Jr. depicted as the Joker, attacking Barbara Gordon, Sr. (Snyder/Francavilla, *The Black Mirror,* 2011), in direct homage to Brian Bolland's work in *The Killing Joke* (1988).

series' first villain, the Dealer, attempts to escape using Bane's Venom and an outdated Man-Bat serum ("The Black Mirror, Part 3"); Barbara Gordon, Sr., Gordon's ex-wife, is attacked with one of the first versions of Joker venom, in the visual style of *The Killing Joke* ("The Face in the Glass") (Fig. 1-2). The crowbar used to murder Jason Todd rises at one of the Mirror House's monstrous auctions ("The Black Mirror, Part 2"), and with it, the specter of one of the darkest chapters in the Batman mythos (Fig. 3-4). Most importantly, Bruce Wayne is nowhere to be seen: his protégé Dick Grayson has donned the cape and the cowl and the mantle of Batman.

Fig. 2: The Joker attacking Barbara Gordon Jr. in her home (Alan Moore/Brian Bolland, *The Killing Joke*, 1988). This image has been recreated throughout the Batman canon, especially in stories centered on Babs and her recovery from this trauma.

The absence of Bruce Wayne-as-Batman is central to the narrative of *The Black Mirror* in that it investigates, through the narrative devices of the comics' villains, what exactly it means to be Batman. The perpetual haunting, both textual

(for example, the use of Venom ["The Black Mirror, Part 3"]) and visual (for example, the recreations of the Joker's violence against members of the Bat-family [Fig. 12-15]), first examines Wayne's Batman's original actions in the mythos, and second creates an opportunity for Dick Grayson to resolve the conflicting legacies and identities he has inherited. *The Black Mirror*, then, could easily be described by Leslie J. Anderson's analysis of *Arkham Asylum:*

> The mirroring of images and allusions to past and future instances in the Batman mythos, suggest that *Arkham Asylum* represents a cyclical mythos of Batman, rather than a single event, graying the distinction between good and evil, corruption and justice, and continuously relieving this tension through Batman's personal choice. (507)

Replace *"Arkham Asylum"* with *"The Black Mirror"* and the tension Anderson describes is immediately evident. Though Wayne's Batman is nowhere to be seen, *The Black Mirror* is inescapably a Batman story, investigating the rationality and the legacy of Batman's mythology through the person of Dick Grayson.

The Black Mirror obsessively articulates the difference between Grayson's Batman and Wayne's at every opportunity. Exchanges as seemingly benign as routine check-ins with Commissioner Gordon and Detective Harvey Bullock at the GCPD are uncomfortably rendered as unusual. Gordon comments that he's "just not used to [Batman] […] still being there when [he] looks up," calling to mind the hundreds of examples in which Wayne's Batman has vanished from a conversation in middle of someone else's sentence (Snyder et al. "The Black Mirror, Part

1"). Grayson's Batman mistakes Bullock for Gordon — "About fifty pounds off,"

Bullock remarks ("The Black Mirror, Part 2"). The Joker tells Grayson that "My

Batman would know…know my woRK" [*sic*] ("My Dark Architect"), criticizing

Fig. 3 (left): The Joker, beating Dick Grayson with a pipe of some kind (Snyder/Jock, 2011)

Fig. 4 (below): The Joker beating Jason Todd with a crowbar (Starlin/Aparo/DeCarlo, *A Death in the Family #2,* 1989).

Grayson's mistaking Joker's handiwork for an imposter's. James Gordon Jr. says much the same, distinguishing Grayson's Batman from the "*real* one" through motive: the
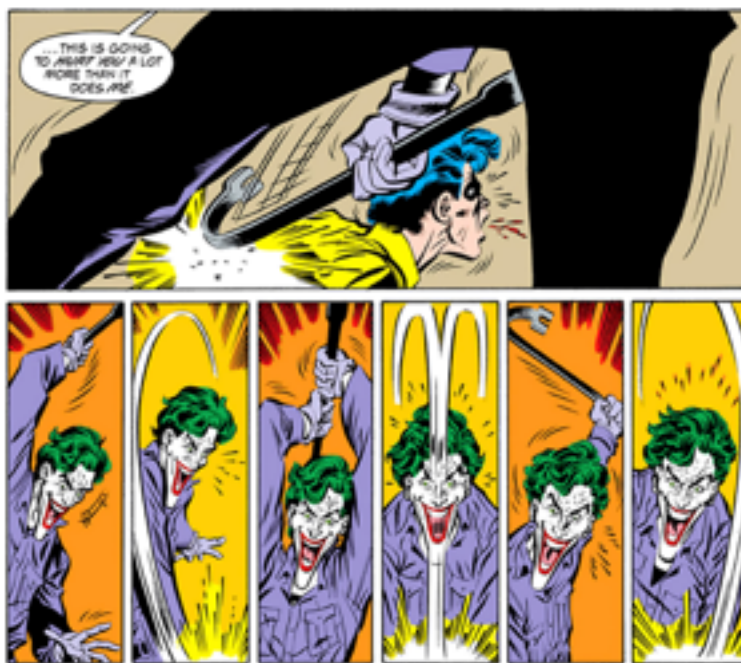
"real" Batman "shapes Gotham out of an obsession […] some pathological need,"

rather than Grayson's irrepressible empathy ("The Face in the Glass"). The impli-

cation then is that the villains themselves — whose deviant identities and actions have been relentlessly regulated and confined by Wayne's Batman — act as regulators themselves, determining what qualities are acceptable in Gotham's Dark Knight. From their perspective, Grayson's repeated errors simply evidence his unsuitability for the role he has been bequeathed; unlike Wayne, he lacks the "pathological obsession" that would demand he sacrifice everything to hone his Bat-abilities. Simply put, Grayson is too normal to be Batman, but since he is determined to wear the mantle of Batman anyways, he must be made to recognize the deviance of his inheritance.

Empathy has long been established as one of Dick Grayson's defining traits,[2] but it comes to the fore in an especially significant way in *The Black Mirror*'s final issue, "The Face in the Glass." Mirroring is a strong theme throughout *The Black Mirror*, which, considering the arc's title, should come as no surprise. However, I believe that the construction of mirroring operates as a deliberate response to Morrison's and McKean's *Arkham Asylum*. The "haunting" device has already been established, but there are more concrete parallels as well: Mrs. Redford, mother of the boy transformed by Killer Croc serum (Killer Croc representing madness and the primordial Dragon in *Arkham Asylum*), screams as she sees Batman in her home: "Bat in my house! ***BAT!"*** ("The Black Mirror, Part 1"); ex-

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[2] Noted as such even by his antagonists: "You were *genuinely* nice — that was the thing. It wasn't an act. You cared about everyone" ("The Face in the Glass")

amination of her body afterwards reveals one of the Mad Hatter's 10/6 patches sewn into her neck, reinforcing the connection to *Arkham Asylum*. Like Mrs. Redford, Elizabeth Arkham is driven to irrationality and madness by the sight of a "Bat" in her house; the presence of the Mad Hatter's signature parallels the epigraphs from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* bookending *Arkham Asylum*.

The sequence that most deliberately engages with *Arkham Asylum*, and accordingly with Wayne's Batman's construction of deviance and madness in Gotham, occurs at the end of *The Black Mirror*. James Jr., who was kidnapped and dropped from one of Gotham's bridges, only to be saved by Wayne's Batman (Miller, Mazzucchelli, and Lewis 94-95), resurfaces as the principle villain of the series. His goal is simple: he returns to Gotham after years away to turn Dick Grayson into a Batman befitting the city, a "real" Batman in his predecessor's image, or failing that, to convince Grayson of his inability to be Batman. "Gotham City sent me a sign," he tells Grayson: "I knew it was you under that mask. Not Bruce. And it all made sense at that moment. I knew what I had to do" ("The Face in the Glass").

What James Jr. had to do was create a moment for Grayson's Batman to look in the Foucauldian mirror shattered by his predecessor, and create such a moment he does: "Gotham," he says, "is a city of nightmares […] in the truest sense. Because what's a nightmare if it isn't a *warning?* A dream so scary it […] makes you change your ways? *A vision of yourself at your weakest."* James Jr.

views empathy as "the greatest human *weakness,*" and accordingly, Dick Grayson

as "the weakest man in Gotham," an unworthy Batman:

> You see, this place is special, Dick. It is a city of *nightmares.* And I'm yours. I'm the *face you see in the glass.* A man with no con-science. No empathy. Gotham made me to challenge you. […] So here's your challenge. In a moment, I'm going to finish killing *my sister.* You'll find her body soon enough. And before leaving town I'll kill my father. And my guess is, without them, you'll give up. *Batman* wouldn't. He'd soldier on. No matter who died, even you. But you can't, Dick, because you *care* about people too much. About your friends. But they'll be dead. And then…then you'll have your *Gotham moment.* You'll have to look in the mirror and decide what to do. ("The Face in the Glass")

Throughout this speech, which is distributed across seven panels on two pages,

James Jr.'s gaze arrests the reader. Francesco Francavilla's thick inking and eery

color palette, based almost entirely on shades of red and violet, is perfectly suited

for wordlessly articulating the mundane abnormality James Jr. exudes. Combined

with his repeated focus on the eyes throughout "The Face in the Glass" and the

pages in question, however, it is impossible to ignore the significance of vision

and recognition underscored in the text. Though James Jr. cannot see Grayson —

they're communicating via radio — Francavilla moves closer and closer to James

Jr.'s eyes as he describes Grayson's impending "Gotham moment." Like the Joker

in *Arkham Asylum,* who guided Batman through the revelations of his own mon-

strosity, James Jr. looks through the panel, at the reader and, implicitly, at Grayson

himself (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: James Jr. describing the Gotham Moment (Snyder/Francavilla, 2011).

The narrative attempts to preclude Grayson's mirrored recognition by shifting the "Gotham moment" to James Jr., when he is arrested by his father, and history is accordingly remade as Gordon is able to catch James Jr. before he can fall from the bridge, but I don't believe this attempt is entirely successful, or wholly sincere. While I believe that Grayson is able to look into a facet of the mirror articulated by James Jr's diagnosed psychopathy,[3] and measure his own empathetic approach to vigilantism favorably by comparison, his response to the constructed mirror is wholly personal. There is no question in Grayson's mind that he

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[3] A detail revealed in "Skeleton Cases, Part 3," resulting from both a clinical exam and James Jr.'s time in an experimental treatment facility.

is nothing like James Jr., and that his empathy makes him a more effective Batman. He is able to save Babs Gordon, Gordon's daughter, so famously failed by Batman in *The Killing Joke*, and, through the trust he's cultivated with Gordon and the GCPD, to foil James Jr.'s plans.

But Grayson fails to account for the fact that Batman is not an individual, nor has he been since *Year One*. Batman is a symbol, an icon, an institution, one that is intrinsically unstable, that is predicated upon chaos and deviance and would cease to function without either. What Grayson's inheritance of the Bat-mantle accomplishes, therefore, is the perpetuation of an institution built upon regulating deviance, but that is no longer organized by a deviant individual. Though he wears the cape and cowl, such costuming is the new normal in Gotham; in every other way that matters, Gotham's rogues are no longer governed by one claimed as their own.

Initially, this development seems conservative, as it revokes the confusion of madness and criminality or villainy implied by *Arkham Asylum* and other Batman comics, and reestablishes the hegemonic order of good as normative and bad as deviant. Once Wayne's Batman vanishes from the pages of his comics, his heirs, the Robins and Batgirls and Dick Grayson's Batman, are inducted into the role of regulators themselves, living, normative walls of the asylum Batman has devoted his life and his fortune to constructing.

However, there is another, more optimistic perspective from which to view

the conclusion of *The Black Mirror* and the 1986-2011 continuity as a whole. Where Bruce Wayne became Batman in an effort to be the hero he needed when his parents were murdered — to undo the past, essentially — and so was forever trapped there, unable to move on, Grayson's motivations are entirely different. Grayson implicitly recognizes the bizarre reality in which he has trained and grown, and takes up costumed vigilantism because within this destabilized normality, it is the right thing to do, the best way to help people. Accordingly, he quite cheerfully leaves behind a number of Wayne's most troubling systems. He embraces diverse presentations of gender, virtually never engaging in the aloof, insincere masculinities practiced by Wayne; he circumvents Wayne's equation of crime and criminal, as in his interactions with Sonia Branch; and he modernizes his approach to madness, following the edict of "innocent until proven guilty" — which has, at this point in the Batman narrative, taken on a radical attitude. In this way, Grayson actively works against the structures Wayne imposed upon Gotham as Batman, and undertakes a vigilantism that can meaningfully, positively influence the city instead. Dick Grayson as Batman is the best fulfillment of the ideas behind the conception of Batman: he fights evil and helps people, works to support existing judicial infrastructures, and recognizes the necessary absence of absolutism to vigilante justice. He is, in other words, the hero that Gotham City needs.

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