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"When I'm Bad, I'm Better"

From Early Villainesses to Contemporary Antiheroines in Superhero Comics

Despite their immensely popular appeal, villains of the superhero genre have been largely relegated to the sidelines of academic discourse, while superheroes have, so far, garnered most of the scholarly attention. Considering the essentially sexist nature of the genre (Brown, *Modern Superhero* 37), it is then hardly surprising that female villains are the most neglected object of critical analysis, despite having an equally longstanding comic book presence as their male counterparts. Since at least the 1940s, comic books have been populated by powerful evil women who are the protagonists of their own stories. Ranging from seductive *femmes fatales* to monstrous figures, their representation – at its height in the 1940s and 1970s – was a symptom of changing cultural mores (Madrid 248-50). However, most of the early villainesses have by now faded into obscurity, replaced by countless others who never seem to quite reach the relevance of the male villains (e.g. Batman's Joker). Moreover, the few successful depictions of 'bad women', such as those who have crossed into the more popular realm of the Hollywood film adaptations (e.g. DC Comics' Catwoman and Harley Quinn), have been recalibrated to fit the mold as less transgressive, unstable antiheroines: they have been subjected to an 'antiheroine makeover'.[1] I argue that the largely well-received recent increase in the number of antiheroines actually amounts to a disempowering and regressive shift in gender representation within the genre, rather than being proof of mainstream superhero comics' alleged gender equality agenda.[2] After comparing and contrasting the intertwined concepts of superhero, villain, and antihero, as well as presenting an overview of female characters' status in the superhero genre, this paper enquires into the portrayal of female villains and antiheroines in Marvel and DC superhero comics by way of three case studies: *Wonder Woman*'s Villainy Incorporated (1948–2002), *X-Men*'s Jean Grey as "Dark Phoenix" (1979–80), and Harley Quinn in *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (1994) and the 2016 *Rebirth* relaunch.

Shades of heroism and villainy: Comic book superheroes – villains – antiheroes

In superhero comics, heroic and non-heroic character types are clearly distinguishable from each other in terms of appearance, role/mission, motivations, and deeds, and the character types are commonly grouped into three basic categories: superheroes, villains, and antiheroes.

Traditionally, superheroes are dedicated to a self-sacrificing prosocial mission. They are gifted with extraordinary powers or highly developed abilities, expressed in their codenames and/or iconic costumes which function as markers of their exceptionality and consequent alienation from the world. Contrary to the equally alienated villains, however, superheroes wish to be part of society. Although superheroes may question the societal system and their role in maintaining it, they are essentially pro-establishment figures and do not (ab)use their powers to change it. There is a line that they cannot cross, although sometimes this line becomes blurred enough for them to cross it and become antiheroes. As superheroes' freedom of movement is impeded by their moral function to preserve order, they are described as "reactive" in how they deal with the social disruption caused by the "proactive" villains (Coogan 110). Without the villains' antagonistic force keeping the scales balanced, the very existence of superheroes would come into question; freed from the task of stopping super-criminals, they would become dangerous agents of totalitarianism and, as such, villains themselves.

Motivated by "egotism" rather than "moral triumph" (Bongco 103), villains are the very antithesis of superheroes and the values they stand for. A villain's mission is an anti-social one that serves their self-interested goals and satisfies their narcissistic desires for wealth and power, or revenge and renown. Presented as morally, ideologically, and/or physically defective, villains tend to be disconnected from the ordinary world

and remain at odds with the rules and values of society at large. The villains' transgressive status brings them great freedom, as they operate outside the limits of law and propriety; for them "nothing is beyond the pale, nothing is prohibited, no means to any end denied." (Alsford 83) One might even view villains as positive agents of social change, since they challenge conservative and heteronormative patriarchal structures – i.e. family and nation – and offer "more disturbing possibilities", such as "subversive forms of organization based on affiliation" (Easton 39). Although villains cannot completely take on the superhero mantle, they can, at least, sometimes borrow it as antiheroes.

"[S]tand[ing] in opposition to the heroic code of behaviour" (Bröckling 39), antiheroes neither possess the qualities and motivations nor perform the kind of deeds expected of the exemplary and often one-dimensional heroic figures. Usually sympathetically portrayed as reflecting human weaknesses and flaws, antiheroes can "offe[r] spaces to explore complex interiority and conflicting character traits" (Lethbridge 93). As opposed to villains, antiheroes operate in a morally ambiguous grey area and, despite their questionable methods of achieving them, "their goals are (usually) laudable" (Misiroglu 26). There remains, however, the question of how subversive the concept of the antihero truly is. Despite its inherent critique of the simple good vs. evil dichotomy and of the predictable heroic narrative formula, "the antihero is not separable from the hero; not free to roam completely unexplored territory" (Lethbridge 94). No matter how unlawful or ruthless, the antihero's "actions reflect a twisted but somehow logical desire to do good" (Damico 92) and there is always a chance for redemption. The underlying reason for their appeal might be their conventionality and familiarity, the reassurance that there are "certain institutions or values that they do not attack" (İnce 24). It is the prerogative of the villain, not the antihero, to challenge those institutions and values.

The breaking down of the traditionally distinct categories of hero and villain can be linked to the current 'postmodern' sensibility, characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty and the erosion of moral values and convictions, such as the black-and-white divide separating the concepts of good and evil. The struggle between good and evil is central to the superhero narrative, and the blurring of the hero-villain dichotomy threatens to weaken the power not only of its characters' identity and agency but of the entire structure: the narrative turns into "a professional wrestling match, where combatants […] engage in endless, pointless battles" (Madrid 251). Due to the

precarious position that female characters have historically occupied within the superhero genre, when the line between good and evil becomes indistinct, they find themselves at an even greater disadvantage than their male counterparts, as their identity and agency are critically impaired.

Gender, feminism(s), and the superhero genre: Comic book superheroines – villainesses – antiheroines

Since Superman's debut in 1938, superhero comic books and their later screen adaptations have been characterized by unequal gender representation. Despite a recent increase in female readership of superhero comics and female participation at comic book conventions, according to recent statistics, only 26.7 percent of all DC and Marvel Comics characters are female, only 12 percent of mainstream superhero comic books consist of female-led titles, and the series that are centered on all-female superhero teams are typically short-lived (Shendruck). In the last decade, however, there have also been positive changes in mainstream comics in terms of diversity, furthered by "a number of broader demographic and political changes wrought by the gains of various civil rights movements" (Cocca 13). Marvel has introduced female characters of color (e.g. the Pakistani-American Ms. Marvel/ Kamala Khan) and female versions of former male characters (e.g. Thor/Jane Forster). New or relaunched female-led titles with more complex and less sexualized characters have been released – e.g. Margaret Stohl's *Captain Marvel* (2017) and Joelle Jones' *Catwoman* (2018) comics, alongside the *She-Hulk*, *Spider-Gwen*, and *Wonder Woman* comic book series –, although they display similarities as to age, race/ ethnicity, sexuality, and body type. Despite being less objectified than in the 1990s, female characters are still portrayed as weaker than their male counterparts and in a sexualized manner, especially on covers and in the male-dominated superhero-team titles (Cocca 15). As to the films and TV series of the superhero genre, most female characters are in supporting and, sometimes, almost non-speaking roles, while those who appear as protagonists are still rare exceptions. Since the *Wonder Woman* TV show of the 1970s, only six films and four TV series with women in the leading role[3] have been released so far out of more than a hundred big- and small-screen superhero productions. With regards to female villains, the dearth of memorable

characters on the page has been coupled with their near absence on screen, but for a few noteworthy cases.[4]

The gender disparity in superhero comics is most evident in the physical appearance of the majority of female characters which caters to what feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey called the "male gaze": they are merely the objects of male viewers' pleasure. Adolescent male fantasies of women's physical attractiveness and sexual desirability are foregrounded in the presentation of heroic and villainous female characters in both the comic books and the later film adaptations. Specifically, illustrations of female characters are identified as either 'Good Girl' or 'Bad Girl' art. The former, in vogue between the late 1940s and 1950s, depicted women in a style reminiscent of pin-ups; the latter, which became popular in the 1990s, preferred exaggerated and hypersexualized physical traits and poses (e.g. the 'broke back' pose).[5]

In recent years, feminist discourse has started to embrace signs of femininity and sexuality in popular culture as empowering, especially the postfeminist strand which "combines female independence and individualism with a confident display of femininity/sexuality" (Genz/Brabon 77). Such portrayals present, however, a very narrow mode of female empowerment, since the ideal postfeminist subject adheres to a slim, white, heterosexual, and feminine beauty ideal. Moreover, as signaled in the name, the postfeminist "girl power" rhetoric tends to "infantilize the women to whom it refers" (Smith 155). Such popular cultural texts are thus regarded by feminist scholarship "simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique" (Budgeon 280), where the meanings of gender, sexuality, and power are negotiated alongside notions of feminine subjectivity and heroism or villainy.

Although it could be said that "the female superhero [or villain] originates in an act of criticism" (Robinson 7) against the male-dominated generic tradition, their representation often merely reinforces mainstream comics' hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity. Female characters of the superhero genre have been largely portrayed through a series of "unflattering clichés about [their] powerlessness and isolation" (Bongco 109) and their general need for male aid and/or rescue. These clichés apply to all female comic book characters: damsels in distress, love interests, powerful and capable (anti)heroines and villainesses.

In contrast with male superheroes, superheroines' powers often have more to do with stereotypically feminine traits of sexuality, seduction and manipulation, rather than with actual strength. Moreover, there is a discrepancy between superheroines and their male counterparts when it comes to the legitimization of their superhero status. For male superheroes, the role of justice warrior and protector is a matter of individual choice that does not require external authorization or validation; for female superheroes, even after they have successfully proven their worth through a series of challenges (e.g. Wonder Woman), their status must be sanctioned by a higher power, institution, or authority figure, further limiting their agency and self-determination. Their second-class hero status is also suggested by an identity that is often derivative, since they may inherit their name and powers from a male superhero (e.g. She-Hulk) and often receive their training or tools from a male mentor figure (e.g. Batgirl).

Unlike their male counterparts, most comic book female villains of the superhero genre fail to arouse a distinctive and memorable response, either from the intradiegetic confines of the stories or from the extradiegetic audiences. This is largely due to the fact that their villainy is inevitably correlated to their gender and is consequently prey to its stereotypical limitations: "their perceived 'badness' is a result of either overperforming or underperforming femininity" (Ringo). Often, they are reduced to one-dimensional and oversexualized cutouts that lack the backstory and complexity afforded to male characters. Although their actions may not be condonable, male villains' motivations are usually fleshed out enough to either inspire sympathy as "misunderstood victim[s] of circumstance" or to provide vicarious entertainment as evil, yet "multifaceted and interesting character[s]" (Craig). Female villainy, on the other hand, is traditionally less subtly or realistically portrayed and, if women are also capable of evil for evil's sake, then their behavior is often associated with mental disorders.

While male characters are allowed to operate easily and successfully across the moral spectrum (e.g. *X-Men*'s Magneto), antiheroines, who are often ex-villainesses reformed to a more amenable type of femininity, are notoriously unstable figures; their inner moral conflict is portrayed as a split personality that constantly oscillates between the two extremes of innocence and seduction. Their transgressive behavior is commonly curbed by the promise of heteronormative romance, while their power(s) and agency are also diminished.

Female characters in superhero comic books are often victims of male violence and abuse that leave them permanently scarred and traumatized (e.g. Barbara Gordon/Batgirl, Harley

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Quinn). Except for rare cases, such as the *Alias* comic book series (2001–4) and its TV adaptation *Jessica Jones* (2015–19), this issue has not been seriously tackled in the genre which mainly still presents a sexist discourse of vulnerability, with female characters in need of protection from and by strong, powerful male figures. Over time, mainstream comics have introduced more and more portrayals of female characters also using force or committing violent acts; while this has been gradually reclaimed as empowering in the case of superheroines, it is however often showcased in an overtly graphic and sexualized manner in the case of female villains and antiheroines.

From early villainesses to contemporary antiheroines: Three case studies

From worthy adversaries to inconsequential foes: *Wonder Woman*'s Villainy Incorporated (DC Comics, 1948; 2001; 2002)

In the last story written by W. M. Marston and published in 1948, Wonder Woman battles a team of eight female criminals called "Villainy Incorporated", "Villainy, Inc." for short. Following the fate of most female villains in superhero comics, the group was dismantled right after its promising debut with only two later reappearances in *Wonder Woman: Our Worlds at War* (2001) and *Wonder Woman: In the Land of the Lost* (2002). The plot of the 1948 story is as follows: a group of young women belonging to the invading monarchy of Saturn are captured by Wonder Woman and taken to the holding facility – a cross between a prison and a rehabilitation center – on Transformation Island. One of the prisoners, Eviless, cunningly manages to steal Wonder Woman's lasso, set herself free and round up a group of like-minded women who equally long for "freedom and revenge on the Amazons" (*Wonder Woman #28*). Wonder Woman must use every skill in her arsenal to foil Villainy, Inc.'s plan of conquering Paradise Island and the rest of the world.

The earliest portrayal of the female villains of Villainy, Inc. is compelling to a modern sensibility, whereas the ideology-bearing Wonder Woman and her Amazons pale in comparison with these sympathy- and awe-inspiring lawless women and their commitment to fulfilling their ambitions at any cost. The villainesses question the system that demands their total obedience

and loss of individuality, while the majority of women on Paradise Island are seen wearing uniforms and speaking in unison. In their colorful costumes, the female villains stand out in a striking, and surprising, line-up. They come, quite literally, in all shapes and sizes, partly defying the conventional beauty standards embodied by the series' titular heroine. One half of the team is comprised of the tall and muscly Giganta and three cross-dressers: Byrna Brilyant wears a fat suit as The Blue Snow Man, Princess Maru is cloaked from head to toe in a shapeless lab coat and mask as Dr. Poison, and Hypnota is dressed in male oriental garb with a turban, black curly mustache and a goatee. The other four women are feminine and attractive but not sexualized.

As an alternative form of organization, Villainy, Inc. is democratic with regards to its horizontal power structure; all eight members pull equal weight within the group, pooling their different resources and expertise – physical, mental, or technological – in order to achieve a common goal. This subverts the usual sexist clichés of women being isolated and unable to play well with each other. Notably, the name of the team recalls a business association and carries no gendered connotations, unlike the other all-female groups of villains in both the Marvel and DC comic book universes: the Femme Fatales, the Hell's Belles, the Female Furies, or the Femizons. Described as "fierce", "implacable", and "clever beyond belief" (ibid.), these women are worthy adversaries who do not need flashy superpowers to be redoubtable, as they single-mindedly and unrepentantly carry out their escape and revenge mission. The conservative ending, upholding the traditional superhero narrative of the "hero(ine)'s triumph", however, ultimately dismisses any hint of the positive subversiveness brought on by the female villains and rather admiringly presented at the beginning of the story. All the members of Villainy, Inc. are captured and magically brainwashed into submission, in keeping with the 'special treatment' given to female villains in the *Wonder Woman* Golden Age comics. In fact, while the male villains are punished and only sometimes repent, poor, misguided 'bad women' like the Villainy, Inc. criminals are instead taken care of in the Amazons' correctional facility on Transformation Island and guided back to the right path. The villainesses' change of heart is brought about through a running motif of the comic series, namely bondage: compelled into goodness and obedience by wearing magical metal Venus girdles locked around their waists, they are cured of their evil ways and can finally find fulfillment as women. However, even though

the female villains are ultimately defeated, their representation as tough, uncompromising, rebel women can still offer "a symbol of freedom and power that may be culturally constructive" (Grossman 4). Their representation as highly intelligent, strong, competent women who eschew the standards of traditional, and therefore appropriate, femininity, offers an example of female agency that counters oppressive conventional expectations of gender roles and behavior.

The same cannot be said for the later appearances of Villainy, Inc. in the early 2000s that reinforce negative gender stereotypes and reflect the regressive postfeminist tendencies in contemporary popular culture (Ringrose 65). "We are queens and princesses! Scientists and thieves! Magicians and rogues!" (*Our Worlds at War* 22), declare the reassembled Villainy, Inc. after a five-decade absence from the comic book pages. In the 2001 *Wonder Woman: Our Worlds at War*, they make a three-page cameo appearance as part of a story intended to pay tribute to the Golden Age *Wonder Woman* comics. Their comeback, however, entails both a cutdown and a makeover. Only five of the eight original members of Villainy, Inc are present: Queen Clea, Dr. Poison, Cheetah, Hypnotic Woman, and the priestess Zara. They are now subjected to the stereotypical limitations of heteronormative femininity and embody postfeminism's narrow beauty ideals. Without their costumes and the transgressive elements of crossdressing, they are indeed virtually indistinguishable from one another due to their very similar, conventionally feminine facial features and physiques. Furthermore, female villainy is denied the possibility of agency since, after announcing their plan of ruling the world, they quickly end up silenced and subdued, caught in a giant net.

In the third and final appearance of Villainy, Inc. in *Wonder Woman: In the Land of the Lost* (2002), the changes are even more noticeable. The line-up is different again, with three of the original members – Giganta, Queen Clea, and Dr. Poison – joined by the witch Jinx, the token minority character Cyborgirl, and a masked godlike entity with three faces called Trinity. Everything has been heightened, from their physical and personality traits to their powers. Appearing "in a hail of electricity and magic and evil" (*Land of the Lost* #179) in the savage world of Skartaris, their goal is to conquer it and rule over its inhabitants who fearfully describe them as "no women [they have] ever seen" (*Land of the Lost* #180). Giganta is now a height-changing giantess with an insatiable thirst for violence and destruction. A power-crazed Queen Clea is armed with a god's weapon and rules over the group with an iron fist and a sharp tongue. Dr. Poison is a sadistic monster with a permanent rictus; she enjoys experimenting on live human subjects and unleashing viruses and other toxic substances on the world. The other 'recruits' are similarly vile. The "[i]rresponsible, greedy, addicted" Cyborgirl uses her cybernetic abilities to "bribe and to steal, and to plunder" (ibid.). The witch Jinx gained her magic powers by murdering her teacher and other acolytes. Trinity drives people insane with her illusions, looking emotionlessly on as their bodies contort in painful death throes. Their impressive super-abilities and ruthless 'masculine' behavior, however, paradoxically work to neutralize the threat of Villainy, Inc. The greater the power they wield, the more mentally unstable and out of control they seem to be. Moreover, the group dynamic is toxic: the vertically structured organization of Clea and her 'pets' is driven by their mad lust for power and control that makes them distrust and (ab)use each other repeatedly, until their downfall is ultimately brought about by Trinity's betrayal. Their portrayal is also undermined by the hypersexualized presentation of their bodies that adheres to the precepts of comic book 'Bad Girl' art: big breasts, wasp waists, bare midriffs, and broke back poses. Once captured, they must suffer the humiliating and 'emasculating' experience of being shrunk to three-inch-tall dolls and kept in a tiny cage. In the final panel in which they appear, they are mute and hardly visible through their miniature prison's bars; the once threatening adversaries are now tamed women who should be neither seen nor heard. Any kind of gender performance that does not fit in with the narrow, socially acceptable ideals of femininity is therefore rejected, and the promise of transgressive female power is tainted by sadistic, sociopathic, and out of control behavior. Marked by 'masculine' traits, but without the authority and legitimization of actual masculinity, the women of Villainy, Inc. are ultimately shown as nothing more than aberrations.

Reining in the transgressive female force: *X-Men*'s antiheroine Jean Grey (Marvel Comics, 1979–80)

Chris Claremont and John Byrne's extended *X-Men* storyline known as the "Dark Phoenix Saga", which follows the downfall of the fan-beloved character Jean Grey, "redefined the concepts of hero and villain in comic books" (Madrid 251). By combining the character traits of both heroine and villainess, the story presents a new

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kind of comic book female character: the anti-heroine. For more than a decade, until a new and more diverse team of characters was eventually introduced in 1975, Jean was the token female character in the original *X-Men* team created in 1963. Similarly to other depictions of superheroines at the time, the attractive redhead had all the trappings of stereotypical femininity: "fashion-oriented, positioned in relation to men, assumed to be unable to control her power" (Cocca 122). As Marvel Girl she possessed special abilities far more advanced than those of her male counterparts (i.e. Cyclops, Beast, Angel, and Iceman), but she was still at times the team's cook, nurse, stylist and potential love interest. Jean's 'will-they-won't-they' romance with teammate Scott Summers/Cyclops came to define her character. Moreover, her impressive and thus potentially dangerous superpowers were, in the beginning, preemptively blocked by the group's leader and mentor Professor Xavier. In other words, Jean was portrayed as yet another capable woman stifled by a paternalistic-patriarchal structure.

Her chance for freedom and empowerment is seemingly wrought by her literal rebirth as "Phoenix" that happens after Jean is caught in a fatal solar storm as part of a selfless mission to save the lives of her X-Men friends. She miraculously survives and returns to Earth with abilities that reach far beyond any human comprehension: "No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate!" (*Uncanny X-Men* #134). The reason given for her survival and for her reincarnation as Phoenix is, however, again stereotypically female: her love for Scott Summers is the catalyst for "achieving her full potential as a psi"[6] (*Uncanny X-Men* #125). In addition to referring to a woman's empowerment as possible only through a man that completes her, the narrative then shows Jean plagued by fear and self-doubt about the discovery of her newfound powers: "You're worried about whether I can handle it. Well, I'm worried too" (ibid.). Despite being a superheroine, Jean's femininity is still linked to a condition of physical and emotional vulnerability, as she goes from an active protector role to a passive one of victim.

The running motif of the Dark Phoenix Saga is Jean's emotional instability and lack of control as she struggles and eventually fails to reconcile the light and dark sides of herself. Problematically, these aspects are tied to her sexual awakening and, consequently, to the notion of dangerous, unrestrained female sexuality. Jean's mind and personality are at the mercy of intrusive telepathic daydreams conjured up by the villain Mastermind who appears to her as the ruggedly handsome "gentleman rogue" Jason Wyngarde (*Uncanny X-Men* #129). Through these sudden visions, Jean is transported to the alternative reality of a historical romance, where she plays – partly against her will but with the full complicity of her emotions – the part of Wyngarde's blushing and eager bride: "You're mine now, Milady. Bound to me until the end of time!" – "Milord, I would not have it any other way!" (*Uncanny X-Men* #130). Wyngarde exploits Jean's vulnerable state, caused by her new surge of power, to bring her over to the dark side as ruler of the villain organization called the Hellfire Club. By accessing her "innermost forbidden needs and desires", Wyngarde "molds" Jean into the villainess persona of the "Black Queen" who stereotypically dresses as a burlesque dancer/dominatrix complete with spiked collar, velvet bustier, high-heeled boots, and a whip (*Uncanny X-Men #125*). Through the ambiguous portrayal of Wyngarde and Jean's relationship, the gender stereotype of women's physical and emotional vulnerability is once again implied as the line between consensual sexual intimacy and abuse becomes dangerously blurred.

The only way to 'bring back' Jean is through the psychic bond she and Scott Summers share after having consummated their romantic relationship. As soon as Jean is free from the fantasy Wyngarde has created, she is ready for a reckoning with her 'mental rapist'. At this point, however, she starts to display signs of a split personality disorder; on the visual level, the text boxes are in two different colors, blue and red. On the one hand, Jean feels fearful and powerless at her lack of self-control – "more afraid now than she's ever been", "she cannot stop it", "she weeps"; on the other hand, her rage and taste for revenge grow – "she laughs to herself", "she will enjoy what happens next" (*Uncanny X-Men* #134). The "Phoenix Force" that was coiled inside Jean is now flowing out in bursts of flaming energy; even the borders of her speech bubbles crackle with it as she confronts and accuses her abuser:

> You came to me when I was vulnerable. You filled the emotional void within me. You made me trust you – perhaps even love you – and all the while, you were using me! (ibid.)

The portrayal of Jean as an antiheroine oscillates between the 'good girl' and 'bad girl' sides of her personality, embodying the polarized "madonna-whore" model of femininity.

By giving Wyngarde/Mastermind a taste of his own medicine through a blast of her powers, she drives him insane and leaves him coma-

tose; however, this also sends her over the edge and seals her fate as "Dark Phoenix". As a transgressive female force of chaos and death, Jean sets all her repressed feelings free, literally soaring beyond the limits of her previous life as the self-sacrificing friend, devoted girlfriend, and good daughter. She has made the transition into villainess territory with a brand-new tight-fitting costume and a sexually connotated, insatiable appetite for power: "[u]sing her power is turning her on", "the ultimate physical/emotional stimulant", "an awful, all-consuming lust", "[s]he is in ecstasy" (*Uncanny X-Men* #135). The portrayal of female power is highly stereotypical, as Jean's Dark Phoenix persona adheres to the archetype of the uncontrollable, sexually transgressive, and dangerous *femme fatale*.

Jean Grey's overdue empowerment ultimately leads to her destruction. Her uncontrollable hunger "for a joy, a rupture beyond all comprehension" (*Uncanny X-Men* #136) drives her to commit genocide by swallowing a planet and its five billion inhabitants whole, a crime for which she must be judged and sentenced to death. However, she is neither unstoppable nor irredeemable. Through their combined efforts, Scott Summers and Professor Xavier succeed in reaching the 'true' Jean Grey: the loving, nurturing, and self-less woman they can 'hold'. She is stripped bare and wakes up naked in Scott's arms to accept his marriage proposal. The next time Jean appears, she is wearing her old Marvel Girl costume, chastened back into her feminine 'good girl' role and ready to make the ultimate sacrifice. Jean can feel the Dark Phoenix lurking just beneath the surface, waiting to manifest herself again and again at the slightest loss of emotional control. At the end, Jean does change back into the Dark Phoenix costume, but this time she is torn apart by fear and sorrow without a trace of her joyful exploration of raw, unmitigated power. She thus chooses to let herself be blasted into non-existence, calling with her last cry the name of the man she loves.[7] The normative balance of gender roles and power, temporarily upended by the 'unstable' antiheroine Jean, is restored with the punishment and eradication of transgressive, inappropriate femininity.

Not with a cackle but a giggle: Harley Quinn's transformation from villainess to antiheroine (DC Comics, 1994; 2016)

Although it has been eighty years since Wonder Woman's correctional facility for female villains on Transformation Island, it seems that the need to reform unruly women is still a current concern. There is an ongoing and increasing trend in mainstream comic books of turning well-known female villains into likeable and friendly – in other words, unthreatening – antiheroines (e.g. Catwoman, *X-Men*'s Mystique). One notable example is the rebooted *Rebirth* version of DC Comics Harley Quinn. Quinn has been a fan favorite since her first appearance in *Batman: The Animated Series* in 1992 and has undergone a number of transformations over the years, going from a one-off side character to full-blown series protagonist. She first appeared on the big screen in the film *Suicide Squad* (2016) and played the leading role in the female ensemble film *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* released in February 2020.

In her origin story, presented in the graphic novel *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (1994), Harley Quinn starts out as Dr. Harleen Quinzel, a psychologist drawn to the "exciting, challenging, and glamorous" (*Mad Love*) side of super-criminals. While working in Arkham Asylum, she breaks the code of conduct and falls head-over-heels in love with one of her patients, the Joker, and decides to help him escape. Driven by her obsessive and unquenchable passion for the Prince of Crime, Harley becomes his most loyal sidekick, donning for the role a red-and-black harlequin costume that makes her appear both grotesque and goofy. The bizarre and tragicomic aspects of their twisted Punch-and-Judy relationship are at the same time humorous and pitiful. Harley is pathologically in love with the narcissistic criminal psychopath, who is too obsessed with Batman to care and reacts violently to her helpful meddling in his nefarious schemes. This does not dampen Harley's spirits nor her flames of romantic passion for her "Mr. J", as she fantasizes about building a future happy family with her "Puddin'" and their two criminally inclined children, perfect miniature replicas of their parents. Despite what might appear as an anti-feminist depiction of a so-called henchwench, the narrative shows a woman's struggle to transcend the limits imposed upon her by sexist social norms, albeit with traditional comic book levity. Although repeatedly foiled by both Batman and the Joker who treat her with derision and contempt, Harley manages to remain optimistic and mostly unscathed, driven by self-confidence and self-delusion in equal parts. However, she constitutes a real threat to the two men who both fear being emasculated by her, as she successfully and independently achieves one of the Joker's most ambitious plans to capture and eliminate Batman. Both Batman and the

Joker are shocked by this turn of events; the former cannot hide his indignation at being so easily trapped by the likes of her, while the latter seethes at the thought of becoming the object of ridicule as "the guy whose girlfriend killed Batman" or "Mr. Harley Quinn" (ibid.). Her life choices and sanity may be questionable, but Harley is unapologetically and gleefully herself. She is committed to fulfilling her own aspirations, and will risk her life to do so, while the Joker is only the catalyst for her desired transgressive transformation.

Over the years following her 1994 comic book debut, Harley Quinn has undergone many transformations, sometimes striking out on her own but most often teaming up with fellow DC villains, as in the *Suicide Squad* series. Recently, she has been cast in the role of unstable vigilante antiheroine heading her own comic as part of the *Rebirth* relaunch begun in 2016. Turning her into a main headliner of the company has proved to be a commercially profitable move, meant to capitalize on the character's cross-media popularity and to appeal to the demands of a growing female readership. Especially with regards to the latter, the producers' intention is to present Quinn as a more 'accessible' feminist role model in contrast to the iconic Wonder Woman.[8] This new portrayal of Harley Quinn, however, largely adheres to a regressive postfeminist script, presenting a version of contemporary femininity indebted to the notion of the 'cool girl':[9] an impossible ideal of femininity, stemming from societal expectations of women's behavior and appearance, masquerading as a valuable model of female subjectivity.

To mark Harley Quinn's transformation from villainess to antiheroine, she has been relocated from Gotham City to Brooklyn's Coney Island, where she has become the neighborhood's unlikely protector and has turned her house into a sanctuary for stray animals and a curious assortment of misfits. As hallmark of her independence, the "new and improved" Harley has cut all ties with the Joker in order to become "better, smarter, an[d] stronger" (*Rebirth* #1). However, this role switch has required significant changes to the details of her origin story, calling into question Harley's position as agent of her own transformation into the liberating harlequin persona. In the *Rebirth* continuity, Harley meets the Joker in Arkham Asylum, not as a psychologist but as an undercover inmate. This balancing of the scales of power between them is short-lived, as she falls immediately and completely under his control: "he saw right through me...an' his power over me...well, it was like he knew me my whole life" (ibid.). Harley becomes the Joker's

pet and creation: he literally molds her in his own image by throwing her into a vat of chemicals which bleach her skin "just like his", and teaches her to be his perfect girl fantasy, "the sex kitten, the seductress...the innocent, the aggressor... the antagonist, the victim...the ditz" (ibid.). In a dream sequence that references the early *Mad Love* graphic novel, panels depicting Harley and the Joker as a normal, happy and loving couple are alternated and then replaced with images of a one-sided abusive relationship in which the Joker repeatedly beats up and chokes an utterly powerless Harley. Thus, the narrative turns her into another unwilling female victim of mental and physical abuse at the Joker's hands, alongside other women in the genre – e.g. Selina Kyle/Catwoman in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Barbara Gordon/Batgirl in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1989).

As a reformed-villainess-turned-antiheroine, Harley is supposed to have successfully – "through much soul searching" (ibid.) – dealt with her past trauma and emerged as a liberated and empowered survivor who will, one would imagine, help others like her. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, as shown when Harley is faced with someone who is essentially the male version of herself: a mentally unstable man named Edwin, fallen prey to a "ridiculous infatuation" (*Rebirth* #13) with Harley. As it turns out, in order to get back at his run-away ex-girlfriend Harley, the Joker has successfully manipulated Edwin into becoming his perfect double in every way. When Edwin shows up on Harley's doorstep, she is however instantly suspicious and recognizes him as a fraud. She then proceeds to beat him to a pulp, tie him to an electric chair and interrogate him. After discovering that his life story disturbingly mirrors her own, Harley unsympathetically calls him "a loser" for having been just "a tool, a weapon" (ibid.) to the Joker. She decides to put Edwin out of his misery and shoots him in the head with the deadpan one-liner: "Later much, Deadwin" (ibid.). The self-righteous attitude Harley displays in inflicting extreme violence on a fellow victim-turned-perpetrator contradicts the *Rebirth* series' premise of Harley's new journey of personal growth. In lieu of genuine character progression and development, for which her antiheroic role could offer fertile ground, the issue of mental and physical abuse is here addressed only in terms of a simplistic rape-revenge style narrative.

Similar scenes of excessive and graphic violence are depicted throughout the comic, usually at the hands of the series' hypersexualized and extremely limber protagonist. Not only is Harley Quinn's costume her most revealing yet, but the

comic repeatedly offers up images of Harley's cleavage as well as of her stripping out of her clothes, in her underwear, wearing revealing pink lingerie, or barely covered by a towel. Harley's sexual objectification is, in fact, so gratuitous that it makes any comment about it seem almost superfluous. To top off her contradictory portrayal, Quinn combines traditionally masculine and feminine traits. Although such a combination in female characters has been positively reclaimed as straddling both sides of the binary gender divide (Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 43-62), in this case it consists merely of a recycling of sexist stereotypes. On the one hand, Harley revels in brutal and bloody violence, acting as 'one of the guys' with her coarse language, unhealthy eating and drinking habits, and lax hygiene. On the other, she boasts an athletic and curvaceous body and is extremely girlish in appearance with her pink and blue tipped blonde pigtails, she loves playing dress-up, going to spa treatments, and talking about boys – e.g. "Batman's eight pack" (*Rebirth* #8) – with her best friend, the re-formed villainess Poison Ivy. As a result, she is highly attractive and openly attracted to suitors of both sexes, yet her coy flirting and nonchalant attitude make her seem disingenuous in her relationships with either men or women. Harley Quinn is a perfect embodiment of the 'cool girl' and, as such, another male fantasy cloaked in the guise of female liberation and empowerment. The potential subversiveness of her antiheroic role is therefore curbed, or even neutralized, by her highly sexualized and exaggerated performance of hegemonic femininity.

Conclusion

As seen in the Villainy, Inc.'s stories, the more conservative comic book Golden Age of the 1940s was able to produce formidable and emancipated female characters: women who chose to be evil in order to achieve the power and freedom they aspired to, outside of the patriarchal social norms. The transgressive subjectivity of evil women that questions and subverts the hegemonic notions of traditional femininity may have a productive potential, just as long as it is not tied to gender stereotypes, clichés and hypersexualization, as was the case in the two negative depictions from the early 2000s in *Wonder Woman: Our Worlds at War* (2001) and *Wonder Woman: In the Land of the Lost* (2002). As shown in the analysis of Jean Grey's journey from superheroine to villainess to antiheroine, when the line between good and evil becomes

blurred, female characters lose more than they gain; shifting from foe to lover one moment and from ally to enemy the next, their power, agency, and even their identity, can be severely compromised. Lastly, as examined in the Harley Quinn case study, recent attempts at presenting feminist portrayals of comic book superwomen by transforming successful female villains into 'new and improved' antiheroines are ultimately doomed to fail when, under the gloss of female empowerment, they display a mentally and emotionally unstable protagonist, whose contradictory appearance and attitude reinforce regressive discourses about contemporary femininity. If the early comic book villainesses could have once proudly declared "[W]hen I'm bad, I'm better",[10] the same cannot be said for most of the recent representations of female characters, whose 'bad' behavior is only temporarily allowed and linked to violent, sociopathic tendencies, mental instability, and hypersexualization. With films and TV series of the superhero genre working to meet today's growing need for more complex and compelling expressions of female subjectivity in popular culture, one may hope that the significant, and still largely untapped, potential of female villains and antiheroines in superhero comic books can be harnessed for a more nuanced gender representation. If these possibilities are successfully explored, mainstream comics of the superhero genre will introduce female characters who are morally flawed, transgress the boundaries of traditional gender roles, break with unrealistic (sexual) expectations of women, thrive beyond heteronormative romance, and are granted the freedom to be powerful and unlikeable.

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1   The term 'makeover' is used here significantly in reference to conventional postfeminist makeover narratives, where reconstructions of femininity that transform women according to an extremely conservative male-serving ideal of feminine desirability are falsely presented as empowering.

2   Since 2015 more Marvel and DC female-led projects – from comic books to TV series and films – have been released or are currently in the works (Barnett; Scott).

3   The films are *Supergirl* (1984), *Catwoman* (2004), *Elektra* (2005), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One*

Harley Quinn) (2020), while the TV series are *Birds of Prey* (The WB, 2002–03), *Supergirl* (The CW, 2015–), *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015–19), and *Batwoman* (The CW, 2019–). At the time of writing, two other female-led films are set to come out later in the year: *Black Widow* and *Wonder Woman 1984*.

4 Memorable onscreen female villains include Jean Grey as her evil Dark Phoenix persona in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), Talia al Ghul – daughter and heir of Batman's foe Ra's al Ghul – in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and Hela, Goddess of Death, in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017).

5 Female characters drawn in the 'broke back' pose have their bodies "unnaturally twisted in order to display all of their curves front and back simultaneously" (Cocca 12), which would be anatomically possible only if their back were indeed broken.

6 In the *X-Men* comic-book universe, a "psi" is someone gifted with psionic abilities which can be telepathic or telekinetic.

7 Jean Grey was not 'allowed' back in Marvel comics for more than a decade, until she was absolved of her heinous crime of genocide. The tragic storyline was rewritten with the Phoenix as a separate cosmic entity that had 'posed' as Jean while the real one was kept in a hibernation state. As such, the Dark Phoenix had never really been a part of Jean's character and therefore Jean was not guilty of genocide after all.

8 The *Rebirth* series' writer, Amanda Conner, stated in an interview: "Wonder Woman sort of represents perfection, whereas Harley represents everybody else" (Riesman).

9 In the words of Gillian Flynn, who in her novel *Gone Girl* (2012) used the term to criticize the impossible ideal of femininity stemming from societal expectations of women's behavior and appearance, the 'cool girl' is "a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot" (222).

10 The full quote is spoken by Mae West in the pre-Code Hollywood film *I'm No Angel* (1933): "When I'm good, I'm very good. But when I'm bad, I'm better." (00:57:50-00:57:54).

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