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# Batman and the superhero fairytale: deconstructing a revisionist crisis

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BATMAN AND THE SUPERHERO FAIRYTALE:  
DECONSTRUCTING A REVISIONIST CRISIS

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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December 2013

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary superhero comics carry the burden of navigating historical iterations and reiterations of canonical figures—Batman, Superman, Green Lantern et al.—producing a tension unique to a genre that thrives on the reconstruction of previously established narratives. This tension results in the complication of authorial and interpretive negotiation of basic principles of narrative and structure as readers and producers must seek to construct satisfactory identities for these icons. Similarly, the post-modern experimentation of Robert Coover—in *Briar Rose* and *Stepmother*—argues that we must no longer view contemporary fairytales as separate (cohesive) entities that may exist apart from their source narratives. Instead, through strategies of Revision, we might carve out processes of identity construction that embrace the inherently fragmentary nature of canonical icons.

We might better approach the postmodern superhero—as exemplified by Grant Morrison's recent reconstruction of the Batman mythos—as an entreaty to reconsider the identities of our superheroes as fragmented, non-cohesive concepts, bridging centuries of diverse literary production. Current superheroes are little more than contemporary enactments of the tension between current selves, past selves and potential future selves. The illustration of superheroes as negotiators of indecipherable selves illuminates the interactive dynamic between comics and comic readers who also participate in conscious and unconscious dialogue with historical enactments of the self (this being the process of growing up) and must also learn to construct identity via the accumulation and navigation of fragmentary selves.

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This Study by: Travis John Landhuis

Entitled: Batman and the Superhero Fairytale: Deconstructing a Revisionist Crisis

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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## CHAPTER 1

“HAVEN’T YOU SEEN IT BEFORE?”: POSTMODERN FAIRYTALES, REVISION,  
AND BATMAN AS “NEW” FAIRYTALE

For too long, contemporary American superheroes have been dismissed by critics as the Hollywood blockbuster of the comics industry while independent or otherwise-deemed-literary comics have been favored as a richer source for critical treatment. And while comics like *Maus* (1986), *Persepolis* (2000) and *A Contract with God* (1978) are certainly valuable for their contributions to the comic medium, such a limited focus often encourages critics to overlook the literary value of so-called blockbuster comics. Indeed, the contemporary American superhero comic is laden with conventions of genre that complicate authorial and interpretive negotiation of basic principles of narrative (structure), and character. As we may find, by drawing comparison between contemporary fairytales—whose treatment of cultural/literary icons must confront those same “problems” of icon identity fragmentation at the hand of eternal histories—the contemporary superhero may be reconceived as a participant in “postmodern fairytale,” a genre strategy that forces character instances (current icon incarnations) to engage in metatextual criticism of their own genre: a term I will come to (re)define as Revisionism. An examination of contemporary illustrations of fairytale reconstruction—Robert Coover’s *Briar Rose* and *Stepmother*—will reveal the thematic and structural links between the composition of fairytales and of superhero narratives. Where Robert



Coover's postmodern fairytales offer insight into the ways such strategies of Revision utilize narrative strategies as commentary on genre construction, Grant Morrison's postmodern *Batman: The Black Glove* and *R.I.P.* employ the Revisionist strategy in response to perceived genre convolution and stagnation arising from the inability of comics production and criticism to recognize the literary framework of its crises.

The contemporary superhero experiences a perpetual identity crisis—the product of a constructive history (like that of the fairytale) that denies assignation of cohesive attributes to its icons, offering an ill-defined relationship between instances of the icon and their historical predecessors, to which they owe their origins. Since Batman first appeared in 1939's *Detective Comics* #27, the character has been redrawn and rewritten by hundreds of artists and writers (across centuries of diverse cultural, political and literary history), and each time, the Batman character has been reproduced under this illusion of consistency: the character functions because—regardless of dramatic, often essential, differences in each year's/author's/artist's Batman—the audience accepts that each character is still, in essence, Batman. In his takeover of the Batman series, Grant Morrison challenges many conventions of the superhero comic, offering a metatextual criticism of the genre in his depiction of a Batman in direct (often literal) dialogue with past and potential future incarnations of the Batman icon. Morrison's Batman struggles with his own history, illustrating the complications of the natural revisions (read: modifications, adjustments, alterations) that occur in comics writing. Ultimately, Morrison's pointed resurrection of historical Batman instances overwhelms the immediate, contemporary Batman, whose identity is composed of these historical

fragments of himself. The resulting identity crisis presents an argument for the necessary re-conceptualization of the immediate icon-instance as an amalgamation of its previous parts.

The DC universe in which Batman exists has long suffered at the hands of its own convoluted continuity, crippled by industry efforts to dictate a fictional universe in constant flux—shaped and reshaped by various creative teams, indebted to the creators that have come before. Major characters like Batman, Superman and the Green Lantern enact contemporary identities riddled with historical contradictions: the heroes possess multiple, often conflicting origin stories; characters refuse to age while the world around them does; and even superpowers are subject to modification throughout the years as characters are shuffled around to different creative teams. In response to the rapid multiplication of inborn contradiction, DC Comics invented a fictional “multiverse” to account for the wildly different, incompatible depictions of each character (and the histories of the fictional worlds they inhabited), so that character incongruence was assigned to the imagined metaphysics of parallel universes—first introduced in 1961’s *The Flash* #123: “Flash of Two Worlds.”<sup>1</sup> But the development of this theoretical multiverse failed to resolve the general confusion of the critical audience who, in order to understand the histories/powers/personalities of comic book heroes, would now be required to monitor a multitude of parallel continuities.

Marv Wolfman’s 12-issue limited series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-86) sought to relieve the tension by simply eliminating the multiverse in an inter-dimensional

metaphysical brawl. In his forward, Wolfman positions the miniseries as a direct response to growing demands for cohesive continuity, explaining:

The problem began when comics changed. When heroes teamed with other heroes. When a touch of reality found its way onto the four-color pages. We strove to make our books seem more real by making our characters seem more realistic...slowly, the idea of consistency became more and more important. (1)

The multiverse solution failed to satisfy demands on consistency, and Wolfman argues that “DC continuity was so confusing no new reader could easily understand it while older readers had to keep miles-long lists to set things straight.” *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is offered as “a repair job. By series end DC will have a consistent and more easily understandable universe to play with” (33). The goal was, to “repair many of the mistakes we’ve made in the past, simplify our present structure, and still allow us to do wildly experimental comics and not feel they have to conform to an established continuity” (*Crisis on Infinite Earths* issue 2, 26). The “crisis” resulted in the fusion of the five most popular parallel Earths into one Earth, which was expected to become the definitive Earth of the post-crisis DC universe. However, this attempt to “clean up” the continuity inevitably led to the destruction of an entire cast of characters whose histories simply ceased to exist (and were, in DC’s hopes, never to be mentioned again). While *Crisis on Infinite Earths* effectively reduced the convoluted multiverse to a more manageable universe, the effort was not entirely well-received, particularly by those whose favorite characters were deleted from continuity.

In his revival of the *Animal Man* series (1988-90), Grant Morrison directly criticizes the attempt to simplify continuity by erasing entire portions of comics history (and those characters contained within). Morrison rejects Wolfman’s authority to “erase”

DC history, depicting Psycho-Pirate—a key player in the crisis—as he struggles with an anxiety agitated by his continued awareness of (the histories of) characters and multiverses that no longer exist within the official, “fixed” DC canon. Psycho-Pirate, locked in an asylum, cannot stem the tide of the repressed memories of “deleted” worlds, lamenting, “Geography. History. Philosophy. All pushing at the poor walls of my skull. Such a small room to hold so much. It’s neverending. All these worlds” (149). Morrison rejects the solutions of *Crisis* and releases the erased characters back into the DC Universe. Psycho-Pirate attempts to rally the newly resurrected to confront the true perpetrators of their execution, exclaiming, “We can have revenge. You can have revenge on the people who killed you. The people who wiped you out. They’re out there watching. I know, I’ve seen them...This cage we’re in. They keep us here and make us turn tricks for their cheap amusement. Haven’t you seen it before? Look!” (151). In strikingly explicit metatextual criticism, Morrison’s Psycho-Pirate establishes the direct relationship between cultural property (superheroes, here) and its production, inviting established icons to participate in the discussion about them (and their place within the superhero genre and comics medium). In “Deconstructing *Crisis on Infinite Earths*: Grant Morrison’s *Animal Man*, *JLA: Earth 2*, and *Flex Mentallo*,” Michael Niederhausen recognizes the significance of Morrison’s break from DC’s intended continuity fix, acknowledging that Morrison “pays tribute to those characters that were removed from continuity, like a memorial service,” in an attempt to illustrate that “the deletion of superhero characters is an unnecessary activity” (217, 278). In his rejection of the official DC policy—to simplify continuity incongruence through erasure—Morrison lays the

groundwork for his run on the *Batman* series (2007-10), the exploration of the relationship between Batman's fragile identity and his fractured history, offering perspectives on icon Revision that refuse to disregard the figure's incongruent past simply because it presents challenges to a contemporary existence.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas conventional critical treatments of the superhero genre might fail to fully uncover the nature of these increasingly urgent identity crises, recent criticism of the contemporary fairytale offers an effective analytical framework through which we might approach Morrison's *Batman*. The popular and literary appeal of the superhero genre bears much in common with that of the fairytale, as noted by Stephen Benson in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*: "the fairy tale is not only a key text in the socialization of the child...but also an inarguably potent force in popular culture, a force that stretches beyond inherited ideological limitations. The fairy tale is both deeply suspect and provocatively attractive, and therein resides its proximity to postmodernism" (13). Indeed, one could presumably argue that with the recent "renaissance" of the superhero across preferred popular cultural mediums of film and television, the superhero genre (extended far beyond its presence in contemporary comics) may have partially, temporarily supplanted the fairytale in roles of socialization and cultural relevancy. In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar further assigns the cultural role of the fairytale, positioning contemporary acts of fairytale construction as enactments of postmodernism:

Perpetually appropriated, adapted, revised and rescripted, they have become a powerful form of cultural currency, widely recognized and constantly circulating in ways that are sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure. Cutting across the borderlines between high and low, oral tradition and print culture, the visual and

the verbal, they function as robust nomadic carriers of social practices and cultural values. (xv)

Hence the import with which contemporary postmodern writers like Coover and Morrison assign the metatextual criticism of the superhero and fairytale—such genres contribute to the very fabric of our social experience and cultural meaning-making strategies. Such cultural clout might also account for the widespread appeal of fairytale icons as source material for “new” cultural productions—manifesting, for example, in the popularity of films that participate in the fairytale genre (like the wide assortment of Disney fairytale adaptations) and network television series like *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time* that offer contemporary enactments of fairytale mythos.

The Revisionist attitude toward the fairytale differs from those who might view the genre as translational, something that writers may simply “update” for contemporary audiences. In *Theorizing Fairy-Tale Fiction: Reading Jeanette Winterson*, Merja Makinen argues that “Postmodern fiction cannot really be said to rewrite the fairy tale as a previous, given, static text to be commented upon through parody. All it can do is re-engage contemporaneously with an already multilayered polyphony, adding a further critical layer to the plurality” (151). It is this postmodern preoccupation with “plurality” that marks the crucial tie between contemporary fairytale and (at least Morrison’s) superhero narrative strategies. Underlying Coover’s and Morrison’s texts is the insistence that the icon—as represented immediately on the page—participates necessarily in dialogue with its past; but whether that dialogue occurs publicly or internally (the dialogue happens whether we hear it or not) remains to be determined by the writer in each instance. The Revisionist chooses to publicize that dialogue.

It is into this discussion (the nature of the link between present and historical icons) that Geoff Klock's recent work on the revisionary nature of superhero narratives offers a cross-medium theoretical link. Klock situates postmodern superhero comics in a period of dawning awareness that heroes can no longer be produced without addressing previous instances of construction, arguing that "superhero narratives of any worth that follow *The Dark Knight Returns* can no longer ignore these determiners on the genre, but must confront both comic book tradition and Miller's influential handling of it" (50)—precisely the argument that Coover seeks to maintain in his treatment of Briar Rose. Klock argues that in Miller's iconic reinvention of the Batman mythos, "Batman's (and Miller's) struggle is not to control any villain but to master preceding visions of himself and his tradition" (48). So too is Morrison's text determined by its necessary grappling with these "preceding visions," a trademark of the Revisionist position that contemporary narratives cannot (should not) claim independence from the fragmentary nature of their production histories. So, by first establishing the Revisionist strategies illustrated (but not named) in criticism and enactments of contemporary fairytales and then identifying the same structures at play in the superhero genre—embracing its continuity failure rather than criticizing it—we may reconceptualize Batman as postmodern fairytale, participating in cross-genre metacriticism that seeks to redefine the ways in which cultural consumers and literary critics treat the superhero.

CHAPTER 2  
ROBERT COOVER'S *BRIAR ROSE*, *STEPMOTHER* AND THE  
REVISIONIST MANIFESTO

To more fully examine the Revisionist strategy, we might turn to Robert Coover's work within the fairy-tale genre, paying particular attention to *Stepmother* (2004) and *Briar Rose* (1996) as illustrations of cultural icons in dialogue with their past incarnations. In redefining the fairy-tale "Urmythos," Coover's *Stepmother* offers conceptions of a collective cultural authorship, providing inroads into the Revisionist measures that populate *Briar Rose*. *Stepmother* reveals a principle preoccupation with the role of the story-teller in shaping narrative, illustrating authorial self-awareness and demanding critical examination of the relationship between text and cultural reception of that text.

Like Morrison's *Batman*, Coover's *Stepmother* immediately introduces its thematic strategy by admitting its concerns with the nature of narrative, rather than allowing a naturalistic narrative to encourage reader suspension of disbelief.<sup>3</sup> The text is comprised of variations on a theme: a stepmother (an ugly old crone, a good, wicked stepfairy?) attempts to protect her step-daughter/princess from the clutches of the Reaper, who—as it is his nature—intends to execute her. But rather than conventional narrative progression consisting of causally linked events/encounters accompanied by mounting tension to be ultimately resolved,<sup>4</sup> Coover opts for a narrative of inquiry into the nature of



its own construction. In *The Late Fairy Tales of Robert Coover*, Stephen Benson

identifies this metafictional tendency as one staple of the postmodern fairytale genre:

The authors have practiced a version of metafiction involving simultaneous granting and withdrawing of the contract of imaginative writing—the game of the suspension of disbelief, to put it very simply. The provocatively teasing nature of this flaunting of the literary contract serves to give a critical edge to the aesthetic pleasure, and it is on this edge, between seduction and critique, immersion and resistance, that postmodern literature has intended to position itself . . . works that can only ever be enjoyed knowingly. (13)

Kevin Paul Smith's *The Postmodern Fairytale* even identifies metafictionality as one of

the eight defining characteristics of intertextual use of fairytales, occurring “when a fairytale is commented upon, or when the fairytale is analysed in a critical way,” and such metafictionality performs a “‘criticism in the text’ . . . the type of intertextuality we usually find between commentary or criticism and the text it comments upon” (45).

Indeed, *Stepmother* fluctuates between the invitation and denial of affective immersion, demanding a knowing enjoyment comprised of reader participation in the textual theorization of narrative. The text itself offers a primer for those less familiar with Coover's experimental narrative tactics; the stepmother summarizes both her in-text experience and Coover's strategy, elaborating, “It's a kind of violent mourning, and so they come down on us again and more daughters are caught up in what the Reaper calls the noble toils of justice and thus we keep the cycle going” (2). In fact, this phrase—“and thus we keep the cycle going”—might very well serve as the best summation of Coover's style of narrative as well as an illumination of a strategy central to the Revisionist's performance. Often in the Revisionist text, a singular event occurs (first) and that event is then re-experienced, revised, re-illustrated from diverse perspectives,

questioned, disassembled, partially reconstructed, etc., etc., ad nauseam. Such a strategy arises from the Revisionist argument that all cultural production (particularly genre performance) is little more than participation in cyclical narrative play. Benson identifies this cyclical embellishment as “the pregnant pause: that is, a text in which there is little or no plot progression but rather an elaboration, a writing around, a moment (or series of moments) in a plot (or series of plots) that is absent except by suggestion and implication” (130). This cyclical model best represents Coover’s (and later Morrison’s) conceptions of story-telling, and it is central to the execution of *Revision*. Coover’s *Stepmother* provides a space in which his characters explore the confining cycle, offering a meditation on the roles and practices of story-telling.

Our Reaper gradually reveals himself to be a literal and allegorical story-teller whose exploits draw attention to the acts of narrative construction. The Reaper is not interested in “issues of peace and mercy” but “with the methods being used and what those methods might express and how to speak of this” (14). Here Coover and the Reaper share the same fascination—not with thematic concerns, or even narrative action, but with the methods through which we construct narrative. As Benson argues, “Coover has pursued narrative fiction as a project of critical engagement with particular ways of seeing,” and the text admits its preoccupation willingly, emphasizing a strategy grounded in a discussion of its own construction (121). Through this tactic, the Reaper seeks “the revelation of some kind of primeval and holy truth...the telltale echoes of ancestral reminiscences. The Urmythos . . .” (14). Of course, this “spiritual” pursuit reeks of romanticism—and as Benson points out, “It is of course precisely this sort of finality or

transcendence that is roundly stamped on by the Stepmother, as ‘moon-baked folly,’ yet one more act of mystification” (134). Certainly, *if* the “Urmythos” were to be conceived as an *actual* finality, we might share the Stepmother’s (and Benson’s) shrewd dismissal. Indeed, were the “urmythos” to be cast as the “essential truth” of a mythic icon, this would be yet one more example of that which the Revisionist rejects: the suggestion—by self-contained, historically disengaged narrative construction—that cultural icons have a cohesively structured identity. But the Reaper maintains that by examining the constructive elements of narrative—by relying on story-telling that annotates its own narrative thread—we might approach some kind of “holy truth,” a *contribution* to the Urmythos. The Urmythos becomes a conceptual amalgamation of all cultural contribution to the icon in question (in this case, the fairy-tale stepmother), and ultimately offer a means by which new fairytales might alter the landscape of the genre’s history. Hence, Coover’s text begs a re-conceptualization of the Urmythos not as The Myth, but as the collective myth(s)—a collective defined by its conflict and incongruence. This interaction with literary and cultural predecessors is central to the Reaper’s narrative motivation (and an absolute necessity for Morrison’s execution of the Batman cycle).

Much of *Stepmother’s* narrative unfolds within “Reaper’s Woods”—a grim, enchanted forest that harbors “witches, murderers, robbers, dwarves and giants, savage beasts, elfin angels, fortune-seeking boys and terrified girls” (8)—and the space possesses an aura of magical abstraction. The woods come to illustrate the landscape to which our story-teller responds—“an eerie domain of profound uncertainties,” in which “small things suddenly become large, large things shrink, all things of boundaries only

proximate” (9). Benson suggests that “the reader experiences this instability as the mess of incident and detail that litters the text and that is calculated to exceed and so to frustrate any attempt to fix allegorical or symbolic meaning” (134). Indeed, Coover’s response to the fairytale tradition is to reject the suggestion that the “worth” of a fairytale may be approached through allegorical assignation, instead arguing that the *new* fairytale functions to subvert meaning-making strategies with which we may be tempted to approach such texts, as is principally achieved through icon-manipulation. Coover illustrates the nature of such a strategy, arguing that the revision of literary/cultural property (such as the stepmother, or Batman) is an execution of boundary manipulation, a process of readjusting the size and scope of familiar elements. But such a process demands caution—the root of “profound uncertainties”—and the Reaper admits that the revision of established iconography has its consequences: “Justice here is fierce and final. Only a master wizard can reverse it, but rarely does so, for character is character and subject to its proper punishment; tampering with endings can disturb the forest’s delicate balance” (11). Coover acknowledges the difficulty of the re-interpretive task, “tampering with endings,” reminding that there are those who might feel as if such a strategy threatens some “delicate balance”—an untouchable essence of the communally owned cultural property/icon.<sup>5</sup>

But even more frightening than potential opposing forces to creative reconstruction is the possibility that such fairy-tales (and other, perhaps dated cultural icons) might diminish absolutely in relevance if Revisionists *don’t* tamper with endings. The text contemplates the Reaper’s motivation for populating the forest with “other

master sorcerers of like power and persuasion,” suggesting that “perhaps, fascinated by the forest but frightened by it, too, he brought them with him in his own self-defense, familiar thaumaturges on whom he can count when dangerous thoughts and passions threaten. When meaninglessness does. The Reaper’s greatest fear” (12). This fear of meaninglessness impels the Reaper/writer, manifesting an anxiety that *if* the cultural source of revision—Briar Rose, Cinderella, Batman, etc.—is not reconstructed in dialogue with its past, then current/previous/all incarnations of the icon eventually fade out of relevancy. There is something simultaneously fascinating and frightening in approaching “sacred” cultural texts, intent on disassembling icons, dissecting cultural attitudes toward those icons (and all this without the promise of putting them back together again after it’s all over). Only those writers capable/willing to produce a narrative that hinges on dissonance between current and historical interpretations of character—those “sorcerers” of “power and persuasion”—may achieve a revision that creates spaces for icons in contemporary literary and cultural environments.

The narrative goes on to cautiously laud its “heroes” (these sorcerer-writers) while recognizing the apparent absurdity of the undertaken task. The text asks, *why would anyone want to climb a mountain, rescue a maiden, slay a dragon?* Because, “herein, nobility resides. The quest, being impossible, draws wave after wave of brave seekers after love, honor, truth, and spiritual repose, thought to be attainable atop the glass mountain, where one is offered, so it is said, a contemplative view of the whole world and a life thereafter without cares”—an argument for the (rather wistful) hopes and dreams of our heroes (47). And it isn’t that the Reaper *accepts* the suggestion that such

abstractions—love, honor, truth—can actually be achieved through story-telling, but he suggests that through the “nobility” of the quest, learning occurs: “for those of a more soulful bent, there is also a need for illumination and self-understanding, which is to say, an understanding of the universe itself wherein for a short time one resides” (46). This illumination arises from conflict, pursuit of the impossible (the view “atop the glass mountain” is much less important than the experience acquired in pursuit of the peak), and such is the true nature of the Reaper’s motivation.

While Coover’s *Stepmother* primarily participates in foregrounding concerns with the methods of narrative construction—requiring its narrative to illuminate its strategies—the text quietly participates in and discusses specifically Revisionist tactics. The cast (“Reaper’s gang”) observes the Reaper warily from a distance, marking his oddities with suspicion: “I can see the Reaper’s hand in this. He feeds on pattern” (50). The Revisionist examination of cultural iconography as continuous processes of construction is essentially a practice in pattern-making. When the Reaper authors stories, his audience responds with skeptical awareness of his tendency for creative manipulation; the text itself admits, “This at least is the Reaper’s version of the history, a favorite of his. Others see it in another light or emphasize different details, for it happened long ago and much has been forgotten or transformed by time’s own subtle poetic gestures” (80). Such is the simultaneous nature of and necessity for Revision. Coover’s narrative demands awareness of the means by which fluidity of perspective alters our interpretations of history, reminding us that our stories are *versions/visions* arising from cultural and literary values of time/place. *Stepmother* offers its Revisionist manifesto: “The Urmythos

is omnipresent, but it is not something fixed; one can shape it. And so, as one can, one must” (31). When cultural property is revisited and new narratives constructed, the Urmythos—the fluid compilation of all icons and cultural responses to those icons—is necessarily re-shaped, consciously and un-consciously. The Revisionist does so consciously: as one can, one must.

Where *Stepmother* initiates the Revisionist project, *Briar Rose* executes it precisely, presenting a revised “Sleeping Beauty” in a narrative that fixates on conscious disassembly of (enactments of) the icon—its own pointed contribution to the Urmythos. Like *Stepmother*, *Briar Rose* executes the “pregnant pause,” offering cyclical re-iterations of the Prince’s shifting internal attitudes and responses to his undertaken quest to forge through the briar patch and rescue the princess. *Briar Rose*’s first execution of Revision is to reveal its characters’ intimate awareness of their participation in their own literary production history. The Prince recognizes his role in “Yet another inflated legend. He has undertaken this great adventure, not for the supposed reward—what is another lonely bedridden princess?—but in order to provoke a confrontation with the awful powers of enchantment itself” (1). It is not only the “wicked” fairy who wields such powers of enchantment, but the Revisionist whose language is the true enactment of that magic. Coover’s enchantment—the employ of narrative as “critical engagement with particular ways of seeing”—is executed in requiring character participation in metatextual dialogue. Benson acknowledges that such strategy serves as:

[A] part of the metafictionality of the tales and of Coover’s writing in general. *Briar Rose* does not represent characters in a state of desiring; rather, it offers an account of what it means and what it is like to be in such a state... What distinguishes Coover’s work is that subjective reflection, or self-reflection as

constitutive of subjectivity, tends to be static or repetitive rather than progressive. (128-129)

Coover's text consistently denies experiences of character and plot, instead offering critical contemplation on such interpretations, executions, modifications of character and plot. The prince reveals awareness that his immediate quest is but a facet of the greater dialogue into which his creator (the powerful and persuasive wizard) has enlisted.

The princess, too, acknowledges her role as intertextual cultural icon, and struggles to cope with the fragmentation of identity that arises from her own historical awareness; the princess feels "abandonment and betrayal...the self gone astray from the body" and her "longing for integrity is, in her spellbound innocence, all she knows of rage and lust, but this longing is itself fragmented" (2). The princess' pursuit of integrity—the pursuit of internal and external (outside the immediate text) continuity/cohesion—is itself necessarily fragmentary as a result of their knowing participation in a literary tradition.<sup>6</sup> Benson summarizes the psychological nature of self-identification in Coover's postmodern fairytale:

The selfhood of the characters in Coover—their ruminative subjectivity, in the modern sense—is broken off or stalled...Coover's prince may be able to reflect on his present predicament, but he has no idea of how he came to be where he is...All the prince can do in the absence of such accumulated knowledge is repeat himself—or rather, repeat to himself that the quest will be his making. (129)

Coover's icons grapple with partial awareness of their iconic historical context; the prince participates in the compulsory quest while incapable of ascertaining its origin, doomed to "repeat himself." Benson suggests the ultimate consequence for such characters: "the prince and princess are literally trapped in themselves; while it was ever thus in the fairytale, the difference now is the double-edged gift of depthless self-awareness" (130).



As such, the expression of internal motivation/desire/fear—deeply rooted in metatextual self-awareness—serves not simply to inform or develop character (in an immediate sense), but to challenge internalized cultural assumptions of and demands upon these icons. Such pressure arises uniquely in Coover’s fairytales and Morrison’s Batman, as a result of their participation in genres laden with heavily-ascribed convention, producing a style “staunchly unsentimental and world-weary, heavy with the history of tradition” (123).

Thus the princely struggle is not (firstly) one of conflict with the fantastic co-inhabitants of the narrative, but it is a grappling with its own self-awareness (how does the revised icon feel about that revision?), a desperate struggle for identity-construction denied by its immediate environment but perhaps to be achieved—by readership, not character—through exploration of historical context. *Briar Rose*’s narrator articulates the core of the prince’s identity anxiety:

He, too, had no sequential memory, knew only that he was born, so they said, of chaos, she of love, and thus they were cosmological cousins of a sort...so how had they arrived at this moment of mortal encounter, which seemed more theoretical in nature than practical? The prince, well-schooled, was interested in this question, touching as it did on the sources of his heroic quest, about which he too sometimes had his misgivings. (37)

Here we have personification of the intertextual icon (rather than the simple expression of an immediate instance of that icon); the icon itself has no “sequential memory”—a conflicted, partial awareness of its cultural history, to which Coover’s Prince and Morrison’s Batman attempt, and ultimately fail to construct/maintain a cohesive identity. Such attempts at cohesive identity construction mimic cultural treatment of heroes and legends—the very strategy of which the Revisionist attempts to promote awareness so as

to challenge dominant perceptions on the very nature of established icons. This conflicted identity construction—a trademark of the postmodern hero/superhero in dialogue with its own historicity—produces perpetual narratives, another hallmark of the Revisionist strategy. The tension between the good and wicked (parts of the) fairy illustrates the genesis of this perpetuation, the eternal life of the icon (whether s/he wants it or not):

The good fairy’s boon to this child, newborn, was to arrange for her to expire before suffering the misery of the ever-after part of the human span, the wicked fairy in her, for the sake of her own entertainment, transforming that well-meant gift to death in life and life in death without surcease. (80-81)

It might seem that one solution to the “problem” of the icon’s fragmentation (at the hands of its own cultural history) is to simply kill the icon, but as the fairy discovers, to kill an icon does not affect its existence, principally because the icon’s existence rests not in its current participation in an immediate narrative, but in its comprehensive history of narratives—its Urmythos. The Revisionist text argues that to kill an icon (in the present of the narrative) does not end it, nor does it begin to resolve the conflict between its current self and historio-cultural interpretations, enactments and manipulations of the icon.

But of course, there are alternate perspectives on the treatment of shared cultural/literary traditions and genres, some of which are acknowledged within *Briar Rose*. Principally, the Fairy caretaker illustrates potential attitudes that value “maintenance” of an icon rather than deconstruction, acknowledging the existence of those entities who may wish to uphold the original condition of the cultural artifact. Disgruntled with Briar Rose’s expressed desire to leave her castle (and apparently feeling underappreciated), the fairy grumbles, “Has that smug sleeper paused to consider how

she will look and smell after a hundred years, lying comatose and untended in an unchanged bed?”—suggesting a model of cultural maintenance that values “updated” versions of its icons, a dusting of cobwebs, and little more (6). But the true danger in such a tactic lies in its false claims to integrity (staying true to an original essence) in an attempt to appear as if objectively (only) re-telling the same story as before.<sup>7</sup> In reality, the “caretaker” does much more than maintain, rather craftily reconstructing and redefining the icon on its own terms. The fairy begins by directly assigning Briar Rose a wide range of cultural definitions:

You are all things dangerous and inviolate. You are she who has renounced the natural functions, she who invades the dreams of the innocent, she who harbors wild forces and so defines and provokes the heroic, and yet you are the magical bride, of all good the bell and flower, she through whom all glory is to be on, love known, the root out of which all need germinates. (13)

The fairy acknowledges that as a fluid icon, Briar Rose has inherited the potential for multiple representational cultural functions—she is a patriarchal tool, a feminist model, a cautionary tale, an incidental instrument, etc.—all depending upon authorial motivation.

The superficial maintenance strategy reveals its sinister dimension when Briar Rose appeals to her fairy caretaker for assistance in coming to terms with her own identity. When Briar Rose demands, desperately, “Who am I?” the fairy responds, “Calm down child, let me tell you a story,” responding with a grotesque tale, concluded by the royal wives’ decision to “slit [Beauty’s] throat and boil her in a kind of toad-and-viper soup” (17, 20). Briar Rose responds understandably, “But it’s terrible! She would have been better off not waking up at all!” to which the fairy slyly answers, “Well. Yes. I suppose that’s true my dear” (20). The fairy executes story-telling as manipulation of

icon *not* so that we might deconstruct that icon, but as a means of threatening<sup>8</sup> so that Briar Rose (and her cultural audience) may be convinced that it's best "not waking up at all," parroting those who might suggest that the Revisionist approach threatens to disrupt a delicate balance, deforming the essence of established character. Coover's text depicts the caretaker's instilled stasis in opposition to Revision, whose goal is quite pointedly *not* to maintain the icon.

Some critics suggest that current resurgences in fairytale intertexts mark renewed interest in traditions and conventions of the fairytale genre, a renaissance that embraces the style, content and moralistic strategies of its predecessor. But neither *Stepmother* nor *Briar Rose* can be seen to simply pay homage to the fairytale. Benson argues that participation in genre "need not predicate the breezy continuation of tradition, in the manner of eternal present, but might involve instead a proper acknowledgment of the historicity of generic materials, and so of the problems attendant on any act of generic development" (126). Benson rightly identifies that Coover's participation in the genre is not one of continuation, but of disruption—the acknowledgement that even the immediate act of fairytale narration cannot occur without its own recognition of the "historicity of its generic materials." Benson furthermore articulates that while Coover's postmodern fairytales enjoy certain conventional elements of the genre, "its particular mode of traditionalism, or of conventionality, does not straightforwardly build on or develop predecessor texts; it does not follow from the conventions of Coover's narratives that they are concerned with renewing or revivifying that tradition" (124). Certainly, the Revisionist goal is not a "revivifying" of tradition (particularly a stale tradition, for

Morrison and Coover), but rather it is a strategy of critically addressing the inevitable continuation of a tradition—be it fairytales or superhero comics—that has long outlived its “natural” conclusion.<sup>9</sup> Of course, to be clear, the superhero/fairytale genres are most certainly not entirely stale, nor should they be put out of their misery, so to speak. But, the Revisionist text recognizes that certain styles/conventions of these genres have crippled the creative strategies available (or at least popularly employed) and that, in order to maintain artistic and cultural relevance, we must break from the conventions that originally defined these genres.

Still others participate in a non-Cooverian “re-vision” strategy that generates contemporary fairytales in reaction to the perceived “problems” of previous fairytale incarnations. In *Fairy Tale as Myth: Myth as Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes argues that “the purpose of producing a revised fairytale is to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences” (9). This is an altogether different approach to revisiting fairytale texts, one that identifies the fairytale as a means of articulating/changing literary or cultural attitudes, and undertakes as its goal the supplanting of new, better (or at least more current) perspectives. Kevin Paul Smith points to the “great spate of feminist re-vision of fairytales by women during the 1970s . . . some of these re-workings were meant to displace the patriarchal originals, others to criticize and subvert those originals by putting women in a more active role” (36). Certainly the works of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Jeanette Winterston most remarkably demonstrate the strategy in action, but Benson’s acknowledgment that “even re-visions which have successfully

supplanted their hypotexts . . . are supplemental in nature” reveals the root of the Revisionist fascination: the temporal influence of a genre’s past execution on its current incarnation. The Revisionist text focuses on the overarching scope and structure of its eternal genre structure and—rather than attempt to replace dated and “bad” cultural implications—plot its own trajectory via self-contained criticism.

Again, the Revisionist strategy does not seek the end of a tradition but a restructuring of our narrative priorities, our demands on the literary and cultural treatment of our icons—namely, a recognition that current interpretations do *not* override historical presences, nor can they exist apart from those presences. Coover’s Prince, even amidst the desperate frustration of the unending briar patch, admits the uneasy, perplexing appeal of the briars, enjoying the “snags”: “Sometimes . . . I feel the reason I never escaped the briars was that, in the end, I loved them, or at least I needed them. Let’s say, he adds with a curling smile, licking at the blood at the corners of his lips, they grew on me” (74). The prince voices the attraction of the Revisionist to its source material; the Revisionist text—as much as it expresses its longing to “break free” of its cultural predecessors—nevertheless “loves” and “needs” them, and wouldn’t dream of “killing” its genre (were it even possible to do so). While Benson suggests that Coover’s work seeks an “end” to the fairytale genre, his recognition of Coover’s playfulness reveals a misrepresentation of the contemporary fairytale “death wish,” when he argues, “it is out of this condition of lateness that springs their energy, their mischievousness, and the sheer delight of their invention: all the death-defying forces of longevity, that is” (139). Benson’s sentiment neatly bookends the fairy’s anxiety over participation in the icon’s eternalness,

suggesting that the “well-meant gift” of the Revisionist does nothing to address the anxiety—and identity confusion—that accompanies eternal life of the generic icon. But of course, the Revisionist text embraces such anxieties, grounding them as the definitive element of the contemporary superhero genre. Indeed, as Lance Olsen articulates in

*Ellipse of Uncertainty:*

The fantastic confounds and confuses reader response, generates a dialectic that refuses synthesis, explores the unsaid and unseen, and rejects the definitive version of ‘truth, ‘reality,’ and ‘meaning.’ Its function as a mode of discourse is to surprise, question, put into doubt, produce anxiety, make active, disgust, repel, rebel, subvert, pervert, make ambiguous, make discontinuous, deform, dislocate, destabilize. (116)

This grocery list of tactical preferences reveals the precise root of Revisionist attraction to historic literary icons as represented by/in the fairytale and superhero genres, source material ripe for the postmodern demands of the Revisionist critique.

But our postmodern Revisionists would remind us not to take all of this too seriously, and perhaps the best (briefest) summation of the Revisionist style may be found in Benson’s quotation of Edward Said, who writes, “This is the prerogative of late style: it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them” (qtd. 139). Indeed, Coover’s postmodern fairytale embraces the immediate tale as the battleground for its own genre history and characteristically (gleefully) denies resolution, arguing instead that even the suggestion of resolution is merely a narrative scheme to persuade a literary audience that such a thing as “conclusions” and other endings may even exist—an impossibility in an eternal genre that *must* be read in context with its generic history. It is into this (energetically) uneasy

recognition of the impossibility of genre resolution that Grant Morrison's Batman logs itself as an illustration of the Revisionist mode outside of the fairytale genre.



## CHAPTER 3

“I AM THE BATMAN. AND THIS IS HOW I CAME TO BE”: THE SUPERHERO AS  
 REVISIONIST CRITIC IN GRANT MORRISON’S *BATMAN: THE BLACK GLOVE*  
 AND *BATMAN R.I.P.*

Where Coover’s Revisionist postmodern fairytales envision genre as source for narrative production that illuminates the dissonance between historical and contemporary instances of icons, Morrison’s work on the Batman oeuvre reveals a similar re-conceptualization of the superhero instance indebted to its history of construction. Indeed, this (incongruent) eternality of character becomes (for Morrison’s texts) the very root of the crises that shape and re-shape the DC Universe—most noticeably in Wolfman’s attempt to “fix it,” but also in the recent 2011 re-launch of the “New 52”—a Wolfman-esque attempt to streamline comics continuity by revamping origin stories and abandoning previous narratives in an appeal to new readers (and their wallets). Morrison’s Batman challenges narrative trends in contemporary superhero comics that encourage circumvention of the issues of genre/icon identification that define the postmodern fairytale, instead pursuing—as does Coover—a singular preoccupation with the role of the story-teller (and the story-telling culture) in shaping a narrative that produces an icon in dialogue with its fractured historicity.

Morrison’s *Batman: The Black Glove* quickly draws attention to Batman’s history as a source for narrative re-interpretation by reintroducing a handful of characters of “old continuity” and installing them in a contemporary execution of the Batman mythos—the

international club of batmen is resurrected. These characters—first established in 1955 (Detective Comics #215)—represent a comics era (the Golden Age)<sup>10</sup> defined by its campiness, bold colors, the easy distinction between good and evil, and textual hyper-narration. The “Batmen of All Nations”—exactly as it sounds—includes: “The Knight and the Squire” from England, the French “Musketeer,” “The Gaucho” from “distant South America,” “The Legionary” from Rome, and the Australian “Ranger.”

The “International Club of Heroes” first appears in a formulaic mystery typical of most stories from the earlier era: Batman follows a trail of clues and solves the case while the other batmen try to be useful but ultimately contribute little. The text is littered with such lines as: “Sorry to disappoint you—but I’m very much alive!” and “Silently, Batman approaches a house of sinister peril...” (38, 36). The problem for contemporary readers who encounter these stories is, of course, contemporary superhero comics have long since moved beyond the stylistic trademarks of these earlier productions; this bright, smiling, colorful Batman doesn’t remotely resemble the grim figure of contemporary Batman comics. In his introduction to Frank Miller’s definitive Batman graphic novel, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore (*Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*) acknowledges the unique challenges of adapting a Golden Era superhero for a postmodern readership:

The fictional heroes of the past, while still retaining all of their charm and power and magic, have had some of their credibility stripped away forever as a result of the new sophistication in their audience...So, unless we are to somehow do without heroes altogether, how are the creators of fiction to go about redefining their legends to suit the contemporary climate? (no pagination)

Moore's reaction to the shifting literary and cultural demands of the superhero genre echoes the sentiment of Coover's *Reaper*, whose greatest fear—meaninglessness—threatens to manifest if cultural icons, no longer relevant, are allowed to ignore their non-cohesive historical identities. The challenge to contemporary comics writers is clear: dramatic shifts in stylistic conventions produce an atmosphere in which contemporary writers and audiences must either attempt to grapple with apparently incongruent instances of the Batman icon (foregrounding that conflict immediately in contemporary Batman comics) or simply ignore it altogether, construct a “new” Batman under the implications that this Batman is (for now) the “correct” Batman.

Morrison's narrative argues that the icon's past incarnations must not be ignored—but rather, such conflicted representations are central to the contemporary figure—suggesting models for inclusion of previous Batman conceptualizations. In *The Black Glove* the international batmen reconvene at the request of the club's mysterious benefactor and a murder mystery ensues. But the characters exhibit signs of variance from their campy 1955 counterparts, slight modifications and adjustments, as the narrative highlights dissonance in its confessional reintroductions of each character. The Musketeer explains that he accidentally killed a villain and was sent to an asylum where he wrote a memoir that made him ludicrously wealthy; he rejoices “I never have to fight crime again” (12). “Man-of-Bats” (the Native American Batman) is an alcoholic. The Legionary is morbidly obese. The depiction of “heroism” diverges sharply from that of previous eras, offering—rather than a light-hearted, playful illustration of, perhaps

bungling, Batman variants—a dark committee of costumed neurotics who have failed to maintain any sort of heroic integrity.

Morrison's narrative works to reconstruct the characters in such a way as to make a space for them in contemporary comics.<sup>11</sup> Current genre expectations disallow the contemporary enactment of the flamboyant (cheerfully clichéd) batmen, so Morrison offers alternative instances: he constructs a(n imaginary) past in which these batmen gradually lose their functionality as crime-fighters—illustrating their lost utility to the superhero genre. In *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, Geoff Klock identifies the revisionist's goal, drawing from Harold Bloom's poetic theories: “[T]he revisionist strives to *see* again, so as to *esteem* and *estimate* differently, so as to *aim* ‘correctively,’” arguing that the Revisionist comics writer must conduct a critical “misreading” of the character's history so as to perform reinterpretation that might maintain an “original relation to truth” (28, 16). Essentially, for Klock, the Revisionist attempts construction of new narratives that account for incompatibilities within the character's production history. The Revisionist hopes to make sense of a character's contemporary identity by examining the fragmentation caused by its inconsistent historical enactments so as to find a space within the current Batman (character/universe) for the diverse and contradictory instances of that character. The ultimate Revisionist aim is to construct a character that illustrates such fragmentation is an essential part of identity; the writer does not create it, but simply reveals that it has always been there.

The Revisionist efforts explored in Klock's book suggest a technique that might be used within comics (by comics writers and critics) to confront and understand the

complexities posed by the incongruent histories of contemporary comic book superheroes. Klock thoroughly articulates the complexities of the superhero's diverse authorship and production history, helpful to those less familiar with the conventions of the medium:

The adventures of a superhero are published serially, and thus continuity is established from episode to episode, as in television. Unlike television, however, the serial adventures of individual superheroes have been running for decades, and as fiction characters these heroes do not age. Batman, for example, has remained a perennially young twenty-nine-year-old since his appearance in 1939, even though the environment in which he fights has changed month by month to remain contemporary. While certain writers and artists have had long runs with a single character, each superhero has had a number of different writers and artists over its run, crossing decades in American history. Since no single creator is essential to the continuation of any given character across the run of a series, many successful superhero titles are still in publication. Comic books are open-ended and can never be definitively completed, as even canceled titles might be revived and augmented by new creators. (27)

Such mechanics of production only add to the fragmentary nature of icon identity in comics—the Revisionist's source material. Klock upholds Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* as the first instance of an explicit Revisionist effort to manage a character's continuity in such a way as to acknowledge (rather than deny) the character's non-cohesive historical selves. First, Miller's representation of Batman ages him realistically (a first for the character), casting the icon's production history as a developmental history of one character, giving space to the images of Batman that have come before (29). Klock suggests that Miller's realism operates to reconstruct the reader's retroactive experience of the character's history, citing, as an example, Miller's revelation of the metal shielding underneath Batman's costume—"Why do you think I wear a target on my chest—can't armor my head"; Klock argues that with this revision,

“a thirty-year mystery dissolves as every reader runs mentally through previous stories, understanding that plate as having always been there” (30). Klock concludes that such a strong revision makes all other previous depictions of Batman “appear to have ‘fallen away’ from the strongest version that is retroactively constituted as always true” (31). Miller’s reconstruction of the Batman mythos introduces the techniques of the Revisionist who seeks to account for an icon’s incongruent history rather than ignore it.

Such Revisionist strategies abound in Grant Morrison’s restructuring of the *Batman* canon, and *The Black Glove* reveals its Revision as the driving force behind its depiction of Batman’s interaction with his own incongruent history. The Batman instance confronts long-forgotten elements of his past—the international batmen—who have been revised in such a way as to comment on their own prolonged absence from Batman’s universe. The Revisionist tactic enables construction of a Batman whose identity is *forced* to take into account these disparate elements of his past, as is visually illustrated in Batman’s entrance to the clubhouse where the international batmen await his arrival.<sup>12</sup> Artist J.H. Williams III depicts Batman’s massive form in the doorway. His torso and lower body are partially obscured by six panels depicting the faces of the international batmen, their bold colors in stark contrast to the Batman’s palette of faded grays and blacks. Here is a visual representation of this Batman’s struggle: just as these images literally interfere with our ability to *see* Batman, the historical presence of these incompatible figures interferes with our ability to understand the Batman character apart from the diverse historical identities he (still) possesses. Even Batman recognizes that, in some way, these six figures of his past inform his own history, that his identity is partially

indebted to these individuals simply because they have played a role in his development (as a textual icon and as a character).

The text suggests that to ignore the historical presence of the international batmen only evades (and exacerbates) the complications of current Batman continuity—namely the character’s self-contradictory production history. Contemporary Batman enactments tend to ignore the dissonance between the current figure and the Batman of 1989 in Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* or the 1955 Golden Age Batman. And so Morrison’s revisions attempt to make a place for that history by offering stories that account for each character’s diverse personal history. The carefully executed self-reflexivity explores tension between the voice of the Batman character within the text, and the voice of the text itself (or its creators). Early on, Batman reveals this metatextual self-examination, musing to Robin, “There’s something that’s always fascinated me. What do eccentric men who have everything do when they get bored?” (9). While obviously ironic for readers (Batman quite unknowingly describes himself, here), the line is delivered in deadpan, and Morrison introduces a pattern that will dominate the rest of this book: Batman’s voice serves to provide unconscious (or semi-conscious) commentary on the text and on himself as an element of that text.

This double-voicing is most frequently used to examine the different revisions of Batman’s textual history, and we gradually recognize his sensitivity and sympathy toward the mistreatment of the international batmen. The contemporary readership’s attitude toward these batmen might be understandably dismissive (simply because, as we’ve already seen, the campiness of ’50s Batman comics no longer aligns with contemporary

genre conventions), and the international batmen seem to sense their irrelevance. The Knight (England's batman) sadly remarks, in reference to the original "International Club of Heroes": "No wonder it lasted all of half an hour" (13). But Batman rejects the tendency for self-abasement, repeatedly defending the value of antiquated heroes. When Robin refers to them as the "League of Losers," Batman responds aggressively, "[Y]ou're being unfair. El Gaucho's a well-respected crimefighter in Argentina. Even The Legionary was great once" (38). In his defense of these superheroes, Batman not only finds value in their current function (El Gaucho), but he also values their historical function (The Legionary), suggesting that contemporary failure (irrelevance) does not expunge a character's historical contributions. Batman promotes Robin's appreciation of these superheroes and seeks contemporary space for them, arguing (hoping) that these characters aren't useless losers. The death scenes of the international batmen visually illustrate this nostalgic recognition of historical value. Each violent death foregrounds soft, hazy illuminations of the hero in his prime—muted illustrations of previous crime-fighting successes overshadowed by the immediate depiction of death by stabbing, hanging, etc.—providing striking contrast between the gruesome murder scene and the character's romanticized past. William's illustrations amplify the dissonance between the character's depiction in 1955 and 2007 as Morrison cynically illustrates many writers' typical response to incompatibilities within Batman's history: simply kill whatever isn't working anymore.

Batman's defense of the antiquated international batmen suggests that divorcing the Batman character from incompatible or troubling aspects of his history fails to satisfy.



And Batman's defensiveness arises primarily from the recognition of his potential role in revoking their relevance with his very presence. When the massacre begins, cohesion breaks down even further among the international batmen, even turning their suspicion toward Batman, questioning, "How can we even be sure it's the real Batman under the mask...he could be the killer." But Batman overhears, and responds coldly, "If I was, you'd be dead" (40). Later, when Batman encounters John Mayhew—the creator of the first club of heroes and our murderer—the accusations are made more explicit when Mayhew exclaims, "I even tried to save the world with my own crimebusting team...But it was your disdain that killed the enthusiasm of the club of heroes" (74). The text argues that Batman's very existence (the evolution of the icon over time) is precisely what promotes the "irrelevance" and abandonment of the international batmen. They didn't change (they are eternally campy), but Batman did, warping into a tortured perpetrator of a grotesque brand of justice. The creators (his artists/writers/editors) revised him, restructuring his identity to align with an increasingly vexed morality, and rapid, dramatic shifts in genre convention. It is this transformation that produces the tension between the contemporary Batman and the seemingly incongruent batmen of his past—an incongruence that has resulted in the abandonment of "irrelevant" characters like the international batmen. Morrison's Batman recognizes the role he has played in destroying the international club of heroes, and his guilt over this unintentional erasure is counteracted by his pursuit to re-establish the contemporary worth of this antiquated team.

Batman's effort to construct a contemporary identity by confronting historical enactments of the self exemplifies a metatextual attempt to manage revisions that he cannot control. Morrison's Batman exhibits an uneasy tension between absolute (willed) ignorance to his metatextual existence and full awareness, resulting in a barrage of narrative elements that constantly threaten to overwhelm. The introduction of these revised characters (and the resulting guilt) is one such element. The reunion triggers Batman's anxiety in the face of the Revisionist's challenge for the character to maintain cohesive identity in the face of a fragmented history. Even Morrison's revisions (the reintroduction and re-imagining of the international batmen) only partially resolve the problem, since their presence has the unfortunate effect of reminding us that they ever existed. While abandoning such incompatible elements of Batman's history might allow an "easy" ignorance, the text suggests that this approach promotes a superficial and incomplete understanding of both the character and the medium, a false "unity" that doesn't really exist.

The Ranger (Australia's batman) preemptively suggests the inevitable conclusion of such metatextual tension when he exclaims, "Every time we get together it's like a bloody nervous breakdown"—of course, all in due time (36). Morrison's narrative arc goes on to examine Batman's confrontation with the third of the "Three Ghosts of Batman," new batmen created through scientifically manipulated trauma at the hands of the Gotham police department. The third "ghost batman" lays siege to the police department in an attempt to bait Batman, hoping for confrontation. Initially shrouded in mystery, at the very least it is clear that he is not our hero, that he can never replace our

hero; he is evil. He terrorizes Lieutenant Gordon, thrusting a gun into his mouth. He threatens to kill, and there is no question of his capability and willingness. And with Batman's arrival, the ensuing confrontation reveals the disturbing relationship between the two when Batman questions, in horror, "What did they do to you?" and the ghost batman exclaims "What they did to me. Your fault!" (96). Batman identifies this figure as the disturbing image of a potential future batman—a hypothetical result of perpetual reconstruction of the Batman mythos.

After shooting Batman in the chest and restraining him in a basement dungeon, the ghost batman reveals his origin, cementing his Revisionist function as a hypothetical trajectory for the Batman icon. The ghost batman explains, "That's how it all got started. Somebody wondered what we'd all do if Batman died" (129). Doctor Hurt is introduced as the mastermind behind the attempts to artificially manufacture a new Batman under the recognition that "Trauma, shattering trauma is the driving force behind the enigma of Batman" (139); three police officers were exposed to extreme trauma, dosed with experimental chemicals, their families murdered, and so on, in the hopes that this might create a new batman capable of usurping the current Batman's function. Such a goal directly reflects the production of the *Batman* series, echoing the frequent transmission of the series to a new creative team under the recognition (assumption) that the "old" Batman has "died"—is no longer relevant—and a new, freshly traumatized Batman is needed to take his place. Only here, Batman directly confronts this aspect of his production history. Just as Frank Miller's grotesquely deranged Batman usurped the "gentler," more stable Silver Age Batman, Morrison's Batman suddenly becomes aware

of potentially dangerous and violent literary descendants. Batman recognizes, with horror, that as the direct textual predecessor, he must bear some responsibility for that which is to follow. He fights frantically to resist this dark potential future (self).

This encounter initiates the narrative's spiral into chaos, as Morrison tests the limits of his Revisionist techniques. Just before the ghost batman illuminates his origin, the narrative offers a jarring deflection with its bizarre interlude—"Joe Chill in Hell"—depicting Batman's lapses in and out of consciousness (just after being shot in the chest). Time functions non-linearly in presentation of images and panels loosely organized around Bruce Wayne/Batman's significant life experiences. Batman revisits recent mysteries, the death and funeral of (the second) Robin, the murder of his parents and the discovery of the Bat-cave. Most significantly, however, Morrison introduces an element of Revision central to the narrative arc: "Doctor Hurt" and the "Space Medicine" experiment. Morrison lifts this plot-point directly out of a Silver Age comic ("Robin Dies at Dawn," *Batman* #156, 1963) in which Batman spends ten days in an isolation chamber to benefit research in the field of "Space Medicine." In the 1963 version, Batman experiences vivid hallucinations (particularly, that he is responsible for the first Robin's death), before waking up to discover that it was all a dream and that Robin is still alive. Morrison appropriates this story to serve his own Revisionist purposes.

The narrative reveals that this isolation experience (of 1963) has actually occurred sometime within the last ten years of Batman's life, but that it was actually an elaborate psychological attack conceived by Doctor Hurt. We learn (although not until the climax of *Batman R.I.P.*) that Doctor Hurt uses the experiment to locate Batman's "breaking

point”—he soliloquizes, “One of man’s most primitive fears is loneliness. When a man is isolated too long, the mind plays strange tricks”<sup>13</sup>—and, having discovered this, he instills a verbal post-hypnotic trigger that when spoken to Batman, will deactivate cognitive negotiation of his ego, reducing his intellectual functionality and threatening his sanity (118). The appropriation of this Silver Age narrative is in itself an instance of violent Revision, and it marks the crucial transition of Morrison’s arc: Batman is no longer allowed to confront the resurrected historical instances of selfhood (to consciously pursue definition of the self in relation to the previous and future instances of the Batman persona), but he becomes fully victimized and overwhelmed by those revisions. Morrison’s narrative explores the implications of this transition, fascinated by the psychological trauma of a character that is semi-consciously aware of his presence within a comic. In an interview for *Publisher’s Weekly*, Morrison illuminated his objectives for his Batman project (which culminated in *Batman R.I.P.*):

The big breakthrough for me was when I decided to bring Batman’s entire history into canon by declaring that ALL of these stories had happened in one man’s incredible life. He’s lost two Robins, seen Batgirl crippled by the Joker, had his back broken and devastated! What would the accumulated mental toll of all those years do to even the strongest man? (no pagination)

It should come as no surprise that Morrison—who, in *Animal Man*, had criticized the *Crisis*’ attempt to eliminate the histories of entire worlds—expresses desire to make a space for Batman’s “entire history” in the canon, ambitions that echo Frank Miller’s groundbreaking reconstruction of the *Batman* canon. But more importantly, Morrison ponders the “accumulated mental toll of all those years”—a psychological query that dominates the subtext of his *Batman* narrative. The text reveals its true Revisionist

trajectory: the examination of the psychological (metatextual) effects of Batman's half-awareness of his role within a complex fictional continuity defined by severe incongruence.

The narrative illustrates these psychological effects within the "Joe Chill in Hell" interlude in a depiction of Batman's near-death experience. As Batman recalls flickers of fractured memory, his internal dialogue reveals an attempt to place himself: "Where am I? This is serious. I'm having a heart attack. Some kind of flash forward. Déjà vu. I have to get out. How long have I been in this cave?" (106). As the frantic stream of scenes accelerates, Batman responds: "Hearing voices is normal. Hallucinations from the past and present are normal. Flashing lights and intimations of mortality are normal. All of this is normal. This is my life now" (107-9). His reaction to the fractured visualizations signifies the character's gradual awareness of his presence within a comic book. Batman attempts to discern his location as he "hears voices" (symbolizing an existence outside of the comic book page), and recognizes that someone else manipulates his environment and his experience of time. When the comic book writer depicts scenes of the character's past or future—something readers can easily understand through narrative conventions—Batman experiences chaos; as the narrative shatters the organizing principles of his reality (time, continuity, etc.), the character attempts to normalize his experience, reframing it (perhaps unsuccessfully) as "hallucinations from the past and present" before resorting simply to the mantra, "all of this is normal." Morrison's violent Revisions disrupt Batman's experience, shifting his reality as he suddenly becomes (more) aware that his existence is in some way fictional. Even more so, Morrison's Batman offers a

kind of pop-psychology self-help mantra here, for readers who (perhaps unknowingly) suffer from a similarly (necessarily) fragmented sense of self. Postmodern perspectives on human identity argue that it is essentially confused by the lingering presence of past selves; how do we reconcile our current identities with our childhood memories, and how do these past instances of self influence current emotional and cognitive processes?) Morrison's Batman offers an extreme enactment of these postmodern perspectives on identity as a constant process of fragmentation and participation with those fragments. And Batman's immediate psychological disruption occurs *because* of the heightened aggression of Morrison's Revisionist tactics. The narrative begins to question the nature of cultural license for icon-reconstruction, as Morrison's treatment appears to no longer assist Batman's self-identification but to threaten his psychological health.

Batman slightly re-stabilizes when the third ghost revives him, and he reasserts his confidence: "As Batman, I have to be prepared for all kinds of eventualities. Every day I run through a thousand different scenarios...I imagine a thousand potential death traps and plot my escapes" (143).<sup>14</sup> But Batman struggles to maintain confidence in the face of this new danger—the manipulative writer—and anxiously ponders: "What if there were an ultimate villain out there, unseen? An absolute mastermind closing in for the kill? What if there existed an invisible implacable foe who'd calculated my every weakness? Who had access to allies, weapons and tactics I couldn't imagine?" (142-3). Batman has come to conceptualize his comics writer as a foe, a villain with access to unimaginable "allies, weapons and tactics," and indeed, the writer holds ultimate authorial power over the character; every trap, doomsday machine and super-villain that

Batman encounters is ultimately a weapon of the writer, and perhaps the Revisionist tactic may be conceived as yet another of these dangerous weapons to be used against the character. Morrison's *R.I.P.* narrative arc pursues that same conspiratorial anxiety evoked by Batman's gradual awareness of the manipulative grasp of the revisionist writer. Early on, Batman exclaims, "Someone's hunting me. I can feel it," and it is true—the "absolute mastermind," the "invisible" foe, Grant Morrison is on the hunt, pursuing a frantic pace of revision that will ultimately cripple his character (*DC Universe* #0<sup>15</sup>). Morrison reintroduces "Batmite"—first appearing in 1959's "Batman Meets Bat-Mite," *Detective Comics* #267—originally an odd, mischievous Batman-esque "imp" who Morrison recasts as Batman's disembodied (hallucinated) "voice of reason." Nightwing (previously Robin) discovers Batman's "Black Casebook"—a chronicle of the bizarre cases Batman had encountered in the previous ten years.<sup>16</sup> This Black Casebook recounts Batman's first experience with the "international batmen," his participation in the "space medicine" experiment, and an assortment of other narratives lifted directly from Silver Age comics (the character's production history is given a literal space within the contemporary text).

Eventually, the wave of revisions proves too much. The post-hypnotic phrase is triggered, and Batman "switches off." It is no accident that the secret, psychologically crippling trigger, is "Zur-en-Aarh"—a phrase directly lifted from a Silver Age story. Here, the element of revision is executed as the ultimate weapon capable of destroying the character's mental health. He simply cannot cope with the historical instances of self that Morrison thrusts relentlessly upon him,<sup>17</sup> and a complete disintegration of the character ensues. Wandering the streets, homeless and high on heroin, Bruce seeks his



identity: “I have the accent of an educated, rich man, so how did I lose my money? I can’t have been on the streets for long because my hair looks like it was cut recently. Who am I?” (*Batman* #678). But the psychological defeat is neither absolute nor permanent, and, in self-defense, Batman is eventually overtaken by an alternative personality “the Batman of Zur-En-Aarh,” who survives only by silencing the rational portion of his brain; he introduces himself, “See, I’m the Batman of Zur-en-arrr. I’m what you get when you take Bruce out of the equation” (*Batman* #679). Only this enacted alter-ego—“Batman of Zur-en-Aarh”—allows Bruce Wayne/Batman to survive Doctor Hurt’s exhaustive psychological attacks and, later, the Joker’s brutal physical assault. Eventually, having been buried alive yet again, Batman “switches on,” defeating his opponents for now. “Zur-en-Aarh”—a phrase that signifies Revisionist resurrection of the past—reduces Batman to a heroin-addicted homeless man, but by embracing that same phrase (as the “Batman of Zur-en-Aarh”), Batman saves himself.<sup>18</sup> And so, the dual nature of the Revisionist technique is fully unveiled: the Revisionist process of executing identity fragmentation by embracing historical enactments is simultaneously self-destructive and redemptive, or rather the strategy is productive *through* its deconstructive performance.

The narrative conclusions on the nature of the Revisionist strategy might be best illustrated in the Batman of Zur-en-Aarh’s climactic confrontation with the Joker (who has been hired to fight Batman while Doctor Hurt and his wealthy friends—the Black Glove—observe). The Joker—having learned of Batman’s participation in the isolation experiment as an attempt to approach insanity and thus understand the Joker’s demented perspective—criticizes Batman, mocking him brutally:

they tell me you got yourself into this whole horrible mess because you wanted to understand what it was like to be me  
 haha  
 you think it all breaks down into symbolism and structures and hints and clues  
 no, batman, that's just wikipedia  
 you actually believed all it would take is a few chemicals, a couple of days of drug-induced isolation and a cheap little nervous breakdown and you'd have me all figured out? like there was some rabbit hole you could follow me down to understanding?<sup>19</sup> (*Batman* #680)

And within the Joker's frantic tirade is the real warning, the joke: rationality is doomed to failure. The essential flaw of continuity—and the medium so heavily defined by it—is that it seeks to construct a “false unity” where there is none (and where none is required). Batman reminds readers that attempts to construct a cohesive identity rely upon strategies that endorse such a false unity, whereas postmodern identity formation rejects the notion of cohesion altogether, instead valuing strategies that explore the tensions that accompany recognition of self-fragmentation. Where DC (headed by Wolfman) identifies a source of generic tension within superhero comics (casting its continuity problems as a critical weakness of a writing strategy and, maybe, the genre), Morrison's *Batman* pushes us to recognize that to pursue unification—especially through erasure—is to pursue that which does not exist.

Of course, this is to some extent yet another evasion of the Crisis, but Morrison's strategy should not be interpreted as an attempt to “fix” it. Indeed, to even suggest that identity fracturing *should* be fixed, is to completely misinterpret the consequence of the Revisionist strategy (as we will see in *Flex Mentallo*). This enactment of the Revisionist approach seeks rather to explore the scope and limits of such a technique by examining a previously unexplored dimension: how does the reconstructed superhero *feel* about his

revisions? In its argument for the intimate metatextual relationship and interaction between the textual character and reader, Morrison's text reveals its sensitivity to its own treatment and manipulation of its characters. The writer should not be above scrutiny, and the characters themselves exhibit the psychological effects—whether providing greater self-identification or psychologically crippling the fictional character—of the violent revisions they experience.

We might ultimately look to Morrison's *Batman* as a promotion of a technique that, like Coover, utilizes Revisionist tactics without demanding psychological realism of its characters, instead, offering a character that simultaneously inhabits the textual world of the comic book and the actual reality of the reader, providing a Batman whose unique ability is not simply to fight crime, but to offer commentary on the contemporary status and potential of the serialized comic book narrative. Morrison's *Batman* performs a crucial examination of the ways in which serial chronology functions to gradually distort the character over time by providing dramatically diverse, often dissonant, historical enactments of identity assignation—a cumulative endeavor—and, like Coover, Morrison's Revision demands engagement of/with fragmentation so that we might re-define contemporary instances as non-cohesive amalgamations of contradictory parts. It is precisely this Revisionist engagement with historical literary and cultural production that solidifies Morrison's Batman as participant in postmodern fairytale—a genre reconstruction that seeks its recapitulation through simultaneous critique and enactment of convention.

## CHAPTER 4

GRANT MORRISON'S *FLEX MENTALLO* AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

## THROUGH REVISIONIST DIFFRACTION

Of course the conceptualization of Batman as fairytale (or more often myth) is not an entirely new approach to inviting superheroes into the fold of literary criticism, but Morrison's *Revision* seeks more than a simple recognition of the similarities between cultural production of postmodern fairytales and (postmodern) superhero comics. By turning to Morrison's 1996 *Flex Mentallo* miniseries, we may begin to identify the potential for Revisionist extension beyond (or at least without regard to) genre. Morrison offers the bulgingly masculine Flex Mentallo, "Man of Muscle Mystery," sporting a leopard-spotted loincloth in parody of famed bodybuilder Charles Atlas (DC won the lawsuit), and the narrative consists of fluid, associative threads centered upon the text's interaction between the knowingly fictive Flex Mentallo and his writer, Wally Sage. Throughout the course of its narrative, the text makes the crucial argument for the *real* reality of its (and all other) comic book superheroes, offering a conclusive treatise on Revision as model for approaching identity formation inside and outside of comics.

Whereas Morrison enacts Revision of the Batman icon via *R.I.P.*'s immediate narrative, *Flex Mentallo* composes and concludes its Revisionist thesis in the introduction to the collected "Deluxe Edition," before the events of its narrative have begun. Morrison—presumably, although the introduction is not signed or assigned—offers a "fake" history of the Flex Mentallo mythos-production, beginning with his "debut in the

pages of Manly Comics' *Rasslin Men* in February 1941," accrediting the character's creation to Ashley Dubois, whose "tales of Greek love and hand-to-hand combat among the gods and demigods were intended for his own pleasure and that of a small circle of enthusiasts" (5). The introduction goes on to frame the Revisionist paradigm, articulating the various cultural shifts that have led to character reconstruction, beginning with "The Golden Age Flex"—"a simple character: his foes were mainly metal ants and so on" (5).

Flex's fictional history continues:

The war years proved to be a boom time for Manly Comics, and the line was expanded to include a number of newly-created patriotic heroes—who can forget Lady Liberty, Jap-Smasher, Yankee Poodle Andy, the Fightin' Skull, and the many others who kept the fire of hatred burning throughout those dark days. (5)

The sharp critique apes (actual) historical trends in comic production, as Mila Bongco iterates in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*:

World War II initiated a big push for patriotic heroes. It provided the superheroes with a new set of enemies and supplied a complete working rationale for the world view of a super-patriotic hero such as Captain America who epitomized American values during World War II...In the summer of 1941, Nazi-bashing superheroes began in earnest—with propaganda and slogans included in the pages of the comicbooks. (97)

The Revisionist executes a keen awareness of these historical trends in pop-culture, powerful forces in redefining the identifying features of its superheroes, and since Flex doesn't technically have a history (of/in Revision), Morrison makes certain to provide one for him.

The introduction goes on to articulate other shifts in conventional tendencies of the superhero genre, contributors to further fragmentation and reconstruction of Flex's

collective identity, his Urmythos. When Flex's popularity dovetails—a result of Dubois' fatefully mistaken prediction of Nazi success<sup>20</sup>—the icon is cancelled, and “superhero comics went through a bad time in the 1950s” before “somebody suggested we bring back some of the old superheroes,” resulting in the “Silver Age of Superheroes...a time of renaissance and creativity. New superheroes were being created almost at the speed of thought to keep up with the incredible demand” (7). It wasn't until 1990—the *Flex Mentallo* introduction contends—that a “radical ‘postmodern’ or ‘Dark Age’ version of Flex appeared in DC's DOOM PATROL title. This Flex was used to challenge the ontological categories of the hypothetical DC ‘universe’ and his success led to various imitators here and in other lands” (7). Here, Morrison's introduction has concluded its Revisionist framing, illustrating the source of failure for cohesive superhero identity construction before even giving his readers an actual glimpse of the hero.<sup>21</sup> His introduction performs the foregrounding for the crisis Batman endures throughout the course of *Black Glove* and *R.I.P.*

Beyond the introduction, Flex's fractured narrative becomes distinctly (purposefully) difficult to summarize, comprised primarily of the hero's ill-defined quest: solve the mystery, save the world...but from whom?—a decidedly Coover-esque quest at that, reminiscent of the “princely struggle” of *Briar Rose*. The text frames its cyclical narrative with depictions of Flex's author/creator, Wally Sage who, having downed several bottles of pharmaceuticals (or maybe just M&M's), simply wants to talk about comic books while he dies.<sup>22</sup> Where narrative threads fracture and disintegrate, plot progression is bolstered primarily by strains of thematic association, namely Flex's

existential crisis. Like Morrison's Batman—tortured by historical resurrections of previously enacted identities—Flex grapples existentially with his own history, and by now we might come to recognize this as an inevitable staple of Morrison's particular brand of Revision. Early in the text, Flex finds himself seated on his sofa in a dark living room, viewing television re-runs—highlights of his Golden Age years—and he bemoans, “What happened to the good old days? The heroes and villains, the team-ups and dream-ups? Seems to rain all the time these days. Never seems to get light. Maybe the lieutenant is right; maybe it is the end of the world and there's nothing left to do but play with our old toys” (20). Just as Batman is forcibly confronted by the bright colors, the “team-ups and dream-ups” of his past—all of which only serves to render the contemporary setting all the more gloomy—Flex recognizes, even mourns that which has been lost to time. And Wally sees it too, concluding “Now the superheroes are as fucked-up as the fucking rejects who write about them and draw them and read about them. All the heroes are in therapy and there's no one left to care about us”—a criticism of the post-Millar Batman (70). And in a line that could be pasted onto the Batman breakdown, our Man of Muscle Mystery marvels, “Strange how I found myself questioning my own sanity and trying to find rational explanations for past weird adventures” (71). Indeed, Morrison's Batman project is essentially defined by its attempts to rationalize the irrational components of a fractured identity. Just as Batman's survival depends upon retreat into a repressed pre-programmed alternative identity (accompanied by a kind of insanity), Morrison's text yet again suggests insanity as the only available psychological response to forced confrontation with incompatible selves.

But even while the comic distractedly pursues its Revisionist project, its theorizing is marginal, second-hand—not at all like *Batman*, in which Revision is *the* narrative force and conclusion. Gradually, Morrison’s text shifts its focus away from the mechanics of its Revisionist crises—the factors of convoluted character construction, the dangers of implied/demanded continuity—and sets its sights on the potential for the Revisionist strategy to describe something other than its own generic genesis. Ironically our most poignant flash of insight comes from the margins—a male prostitute, throwing in the towel in a dingy subway bathroom, exclaims “I’m sick of the real thing. Dirt and shit and going down on fat guys for a few dollars to buy a shitty hamburger, so you end up as fat as they are” before injecting “krystal,” a new drug that “takes you right out of this world and into this place where you see everything that has happened . . . is happening, will happen, could happen, couldn’t happen . . . You see reality for what it is . . . the imaginary story” (44). The text’s underlying preoccupations gradually shift into focus, as Morrison begins to situate comics (and specifically the Revisionist comic) as a model for addressing the ways in which we interpret and construct reality. Superheroes play a definitive role—at least for Wally and, presumably, Morrison—in molding individual perceptual inclinations, and Wally attempts to articulate this developmental role:

They talk to you all the time when you’re little. They live in...I don’t know...it’s like a factory where ideas are made. They escaped from ‘the Absolute’ but the plan went wrong. Reality was flawed from the beginning. Haven’t you ever felt like there’s something missing? ...they bypassed the death of their reality by becoming fictional in ours...the ultimate pathetic truth in pathetic existence. (95-96)



Wally argues that “we made the comics because we knew. Somehow we knew something was missing and we tried to fill the gap with stories about gods and superheroes...the comics are just, like, crude attempts to remember the truth about reality” (96). Here Morrison offers the argument for the value of the comic art form and, more specifically, the superhero genre—its ability to offer narratives that “fill the gap,” an attempt (no matter how hopeless) to confront basic truths of reality, to use fictional stories to examine and critique real stories. The ultimate goal? “no more barriers between the real and the imaginary” (100).

The text attempts to deconstruct that barrier, the implied dichotomy between the real and the imaginary, offering Wally’s prototypical experience of the anxiety that accompanies such an endeavor. Lying in a puddle of his own vomit, Wally freaks out: “It’s the universe...it’s...ah... it’s moving in...I can’t describe it...like a soap bubble collapsing...Are you there? I can seem them blurring in the corner of my eye...multiple universes converging” (58). The visual representation of this convergence solidifies the hypertextual pairing with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, as the fictional crisis (refusing to “stay put” in historical time and place) becomes once again quite real and immediate for Wally. The boundaries continue to blur, this time between writer and character, when a confused Wally claims, “I’m Flex Mentallo...no, no, he’s a superhero. I made him up when I was a kid...No...I just feel sick and...umm...disorganized” (73). At another time, Wally—who inhabits a seemingly psychologically realistic depiction of Earth—begins to internalize metaphysics of the superhero genre, explaining “It doesn’t matter if I die here...well, I’ll still be alive somewhere else. Endless parallel worlds. Infinite versions of me” (41). As a

result of his indulgence in the deconstruction of the imposed real/imaginary binary, Wally begins to understand his own physical and psychological dimensions through his interaction with generic superhero tropes. And Morrison invites us to do the same, concluding the narrative with his direct appeal to the reader: “Welcome. You have been inhabiting the first ultra-post-futuristic comic: characters are allowed full synchrointeraction with readers at this level” (107). This interaction between characters and readers might serve as the gateway to the elimination of preconceived barriers between the real and the imaginary—an invitation for us to let the Crisis step outside the comic (or, rather, acknowledge that the crisis has always been outside the comic).

But Morrison’s text offers more than a far-out pop-psychology treatise on the mystical powers of metafiction (a tired exercise). The tie between all of this philosophizing and the Revisionist critique of identity-construction lies in an examination of the functional components of the comic book medium, the sequential manipulation of two-dimensional space. In *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What they Mean*, Douglas Wolk argues:

Comics are sequences of images that are neither continuous (like the ‘complete body’) nor simultaneous. They include spatial representations and temporal abstractions of images, directed by the temporal representations and spatial abstractions of language. They are, in short, an ideal medium for dividing the reader’s consciousness in multiple subjectivities. (269-270)

Such is the nature of Revisionist attraction to the comics medium—an interest in fractured cultural icons, grounded in its recognition of a division of consciousness, a play of multiple subjectivities within the fictional figure (Batman, Prince Charming, Briar Rose). Revision is important because it argues that the narrative fragmentation of

fictional consciousnesses (as an inevitable result of serial cultural production) represents the dividing of consciousness demanded of its readers in order to achieve valid perceptual vantage points. Batman's crisis—an attempt to understand the self by pursuing multiple subjectivities, exploring identity by embracing fragmentation rather than severing incompatible elements—serves as a model for a holistic perceptual project. As Wolk suggests, “What Morrison tells us, every chance he gets, is that a higher-dimensional construct (like the complete version of the world in which we readers live) can be correctly perceived only from a multiple perspective. Vision must be decentered to see and understand complex constructs; standard stereoptic vision won't do” (266). Indeed, Morrison's Batman and Coover's Prince offer striking arguments for the necessity of approaching “a complete version of the world” via perceptual fragmentation, “decentering vision” by clashing with historical interpretations of the self. And, as Wolk recognizes, this fracturing is valuable in itself, since “having an unstable definition of the self, in Morrison's cosmology, makes perception of the invisible more possible, since it means the vantage point doesn't have to be fixed” (267). The crises of fractured characters are the crises of their readers, a demand that we stop running from threats to cohesion, that we stop asking for continuity, and that we embrace historically fragmented identities as a valuable model for developing perceptual growth through fragmented perspective.

And ultimately, the future of the postmodern superhero comic need not be as dismal as some critics of the genre might wish to suggest, many of whom argue that the

genre itself has long-since lost most (if not all) of its literary merit. Take Richard Reynolds, for example, who maintains in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*:

It may well be (as many critics are now arguing) that the superhero genre belongs to the early days of the comic. The rules of continuity and the audience's expectations may mean that nothing further can be achieved. If that is the case—if the development of comics carries their momentum away from the superhero—it will be telling to observe what becomes of the key superheroes and their myths. It is even possible that, released from the treadmill of monthly serial continuity, one or two of the most effective superhero myths might ascend the cultural ladder and become established as suitable vehicles for 'high art.' (118)

It is worth noting that Reynolds participates in a sort of essentialist criticism of our heroes, ignoring many of the tensions identified as crucial by the Revisionist. Take, for example, his reading of Batman:

What makes Batman so different from Superman is that his character is formed by confronting a world which refuses to make sense. His experiences might have taught him to be wholly cynical—yet he continues to risk life and limb in a one-man war against crime...all Batman's most effective scripters and artists have understood that this madness is a part of Batman's special identity, and that the protagonist's obsessive character links him with his enemies in a more personal way than, say, Superman. (67)

Reynolds' character sketch completely ignores the possibility that this "Batman essence" might disintegrate if we were to hold two disparate visions of the icon in simultaneous regard—a crucial oversight for the Revisionist.

Such pessimistic perspectives on the trajectory of the superhero genre only underscore the extent to which the genre depends upon Revision as a means for retaining relevance—a necessity for critics and readers alike. Wolk suggests that "for most people, growing up means giving up the things of childhood—superheroes, say. Morrison, though, has shown no interest at all in ditching the interests of his youth, especially

superheroes. Instead, he suggests, growing up means understanding them more fully or using their pop mojo more wisely” and that “if superhero comics don’t speak to the realities of their readers, that’s not a problem with the genre but a demand to improve its execution” (277, 288). In order to “work through” the problems of the genre, we must expand our critical approach, and Wolk makes the important distinction that “what Morrison’s implying...isn’t just that superhero stories are exaggerated metaphors for aspects of human experience, but that human experience is in fact the same thing as their titanic conflicts, described in different terms but just as grand” (287). We must refuse to exclusively view the superhero as thematic metaphor, so as to recognize that our serialized heroes offer themselves as models for perceptual growth, and in this we may come to understand Morrison’s texts not as an argument for the death of the superhero, nor as genre renaissance—a return to conventional practices—but rather a construction of a new space for superhero comics as literal human experience, inroads to strategies of constructing reality, models of perceptive development. Because, ultimately, Revision is a metaphysical entreaty on identity formation outside the comic. Human experience (of the self, of time and so on) bears striking similarity to the Revisionist superhero’s endeavors for identity construction. Life is an exercise in exploring contemporary selves in dialogue with past selves—an inevitable dialogue that occurs in internal monologue, repression, suppression, conscious and unconscious memory, etc.—and, as Morrison and Coover suggest, we might do better than simply glossing over the tension, the contradiction, all those tricky thorns that make us anxious. We are a composite of the fairytales we’ve lived, the cultural fairytales told of us, the literary fairytales we’ve

absorbed. And, at least for Coover and Morrison, it's time we abandon efforts of cohesion and continuity, and embrace that fragmentation as an instrument of perceptual decentering, a pursuit of multiple subjectivities and better vantage points.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Each universe possesses a parallel earth inhabited by superheroes that share continuity with each other, but *not* with the heroes of the other parallel earths. So, for example, if a Superman comic seems to contradict the character's accepted continuity (origin, appearance, superpowers), DC can simply explain that this isn't the "official" superman (from Earth-2), but it is the communist Superman from Earth-30.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Morrison's *Animal Man* narrative arc initially consisted of the author's attempt to promote vegetarianism and animal rights, but halfway through—as if unable to avoid the issue any longer—he hijacks the narrative, shifting its trajectory toward his ultimate discussion (and condemnation) of DC's attempt to erase unwanted superhero continuity in the crisis.

<sup>3</sup> As is typical of Coover, the first quarter of text serves as its thesis and instruction manual, the rest is its demonstration and riff.

<sup>4</sup> Benson's definition of narrative is particularly helpful for elucidation: "By narration here I mean in particular the formal trajectory of plot, the progression through a series of causally related events toward an ending that functions, in whatever manner, to resolve, explain, and thereby make fixedly meaningful the events it serves to cap" (130).

<sup>5</sup> This presumption might be one consequence of ill-perceived definitions of Urmythos as "absolute essence"—an encouragement that fairytales/cultural icons possess a cohesive self that we might try to adhere to" and, as such, were we to re-write a character we must do so with accuracy (there is no such thing as accuracy for the Revisionist).

<sup>6</sup> It is the Revisionist argument that continued production of literary icons results in a *necessary fragmentation* rather than producing a chain of cohesive self-contained enactments of one iconic entity. And the Revisionist pursues that fragmentation in the text and in its characters (Coover's Prince and Morrison's Batman certainly suffer the consequences of shattered identities/psyches).

<sup>7</sup> Feminist critique is often particularly successful in revealing the ideologies propping up such illusions.

<sup>8</sup> The pattern plays out throughout the novella. For example: "The crone...is telling her a story about a princess guarded by a fire-breathing dragon known for his ferocity and his insatiable appetite for tender young maidens..." (66).

<sup>9</sup> Certainly, there are those who view revision as an altogether different strategy, one in which we might confront and correct mistreatment of minorities in dominant cultural forms of story-telling (see Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter for enactments of this strategy.)

<sup>10</sup> Roughly the period of comics written from the late 1930s through the 40s, followed by the Silver Age (~1956 to the early 70s).

<sup>11</sup> This would be akin to Carter's strategy of reconstructing fictions that address shifts in cultural perceptions toward its thematic tones, constructing narratives that address contemporary shifts in attitudes toward (super)heroism.

<sup>12</sup> Morrison, as the text's author, exerts significant creative control over the artist's illustrations, typically providing story-boards and detailed instructions for visual layouts,



which is why it is possible to read the comics artwork as an authorial extension of Morrison's ambitions for the project.

<sup>13</sup> This is a direct quotation from "Robin Dies at Dawn" (*Batman* #156)—an illustration of Morrison's techniques of using revision to collapse the comic book's production history within the immediate text.

<sup>14</sup> We might understand Batman's neurotic preparation not simply as a character trait, but as a metatextual consequence of his historical experience within his comics. As a character, he has experienced years and years of death-traps, criminal plots—"a thousand different scenarios"—and so (as an embodiment of that entire history of experience) this Batman truly has had quite a bit of practice thanks to his comic book writers.

<sup>15</sup> The pages of *Batman R.I.P.* are not numbered. For ease of use, I will cite the number and title of the source issue as it was originally published in comic format before collected and republished as the *R.I.P.* graphic novel.

<sup>16</sup> In yet another metatextual wrinkle, DC Comics eventually published *The Black Casebook*—a paperback collection of the stories used as a basis for Morrison's *Batman* run.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this Batman's tentative metatextual awareness is crucial in providing the semi-consciousness necessary for this mental collapse. It is only because Batman possesses *some* level of awareness of his own production history (suspicious that his existence is in somehow a fiction subject to manipulation at the hands of the "invisible foe") that the persistent return of revised historical narratives disturbs him to the point where he must divorce himself from rational thought.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the text yet again emphasizes the ways in which the character's strength is derived from his constant revision at the hands of his creators. Batman explains, "I wanted to taste the flavor of death. I wanted to know that I had finally experienced every eventuality. All it takes is time. Days. Months. Years, spent memorizing the finite ways there are to hurt and break a man. Preparing for all of them. I've escaped from every conceivable deathtrap. Ten times. A dozen times" (no pagination). Again Batman's "practice" is conceived as a fortunate consequence of his existence within the comic book medium—a medium that demands he must be put through trial after trial, and so cannot be killed because his preparation is simply too thorough.

<sup>19</sup> The Joker's dialogue is neither capitalized nor (fully) punctuated within the text.

<sup>20</sup> "What happened was that, towards the end, Ashley became convinced that the Nazis were going to win the war and he panicked a little...Shocking as 'Jap-Smasher Joins a Winning Team!' was, it was soon to be eclipsed in infamy by *Flex Metallo* #41 with its 'feature-length action extravaganza,' 'Flex Hitler—President of Earth...a 22-page hymn to evil and bigotry...' 'We misjudged the mood of the readership at that time,' admits Chuck Fiasco..." (6).

<sup>21</sup> Even offering an in-text nod to critics of the outcome, quoting "veteran artist" Chuck Fiasco: "I don't particularly like any of this new stuff, the very dark, menacing sort of stuff. I didn't like what they did to Flex, I'm sorry. There was no sense of childish wonder like we had in the old days, it was all head crush this, snap that...there was no joy in it, it was a cold joyless thing they created, a kind of abortion, I'd say...And who can understand this stuff? This modern stuff? You'd have to be a modern Einstein or a

Stephen Hawking kind of character to understand what the hell's going on in these comics. Am I right? Is it just me?" (7).

<sup>22</sup> Wally offers the best summary of the text's motivating tension: "I mean I was talking about I've just fucking taken all those pills and I'm going to fucking die and my head's exploding with this stuff comics all these comics and superheroes and it's just getting horrible now it just feels sick" (64).

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