"Can I call you Mommy?" Myths of the feminine and superheroic in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's Black Orchid

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Abstract
This article uses Claude Lévi-Strauss's linguistic theories to examine the intersection of superheroic and feminine myths in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's Black Orchid. It reveals how this text substitutes traditionally feminine tropes (such as mothering, passivity and purity) and taboos for the more usual elements underlying the superhero myth, and explores the effects of this replacement. It is the contention of this article that, to date, the superheroine myth has followed a similar structure to the superhero myth. Figures such as Wonder Woman fight and lead alongside their male counterparts, using masculine notions of leadership and camaraderie. Elements such as idealised physiques apply equally to both genders and the majority of superpowers seem gender-neutral. Of course the number of male superheroes certainly outweighs the female, and gender stereotypes have been used (the cover of Adventure Comics #401 shows Supergirl 'ABSOLUTELY TERRIFIED OF A MOUSE!'), but overall the same (masculine) notions underpin both male and female superheroes. It often seems that the feminised superheroic has yet to be fully constructed and explored. This article will initially summarise Lévi-Strauss's linguistic model of myth, before applying the same to the traditional superhero myth in order to reveal its underlying binaries and gender bias. It then applies this model to Black Orchid. Areas addressed will include the superhero and violence (via an exploration of feminine passivity and the motif of the climactic battle), the superhero and power (considering myths such as Mother Nature and the motherland), and the superhero and identity (using a case study of the May Queen). It concludes that Black Orchid's subversion of the superhero is achieved by its employment of feminine myths, and that in so doing it is able to resolve the power conundrum and identity fracture that underlie this genre.

It seems appropriate to initially situate *Black Orchid* within the superhero tradition. Black Orchid made her first appearance in *Adventure Comics* in 1973 and subsequently featured in a handful of issues of *Phantom Stranger* between 1974 and 1976 (Fig.1). Her identity and origin were never revealed and she remained an enigmatic heroine. Although the Orchid had a number of superpowers (including flight, super-strength, and invulnerability to bullets), these original crime and mystery stories instead relied upon her mastery of disguise; often her impersonation of a background character would only be discovered at the end of the text, along with her calling card. As such, she was a curious absence in many senses.

The Orchid's run was short-lived and, aside from a few later cameos, she was forgotten until 1989, when Neil Gaiman rewrote the character for a three-part mini-series illustrated by Dave McKean (Fig. 2).[1] This version redefined Black Orchid as a plant/human hybrid created by eco-scientist Dr Philip Sylvian from the DNA of his deceased childhood sweetheart Susan Linden. As an adult, Susan married Carl Thorne, a henchman of Lex Luthor's,

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[1] Gaiman claims that when he first pitched the idea to DC editor Karen Berger, she replied 'Black Hawk Kid, who's he?' (Mark Salisbury, *Writers on Comic Scriptwriting* (London: Titan Books, 1999), p. 98).

until at Phil's urging she finally left him. Thorne murdered her to prevent her testifying against him, and Dr Sylvian subsequently used her DNA to create a collection of orchid-human hybrids, the first of which Gaiman identifies as the original 1970s Black Orchid. Gaiman's 1989 mini-series begins with her death and the subsequent destruction of Sylvian's laboratory, which kills all the other hybrids except two: one adult, one child.
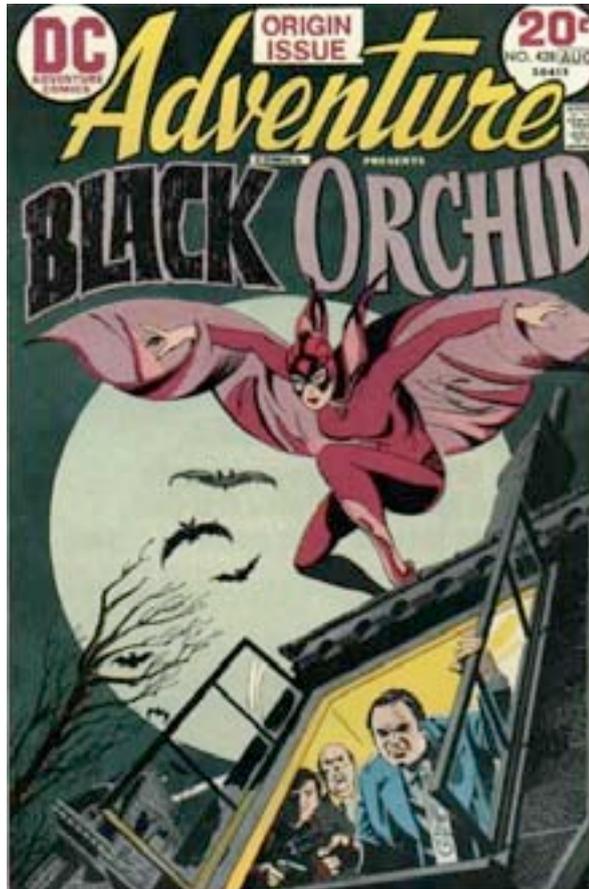

Fig. 1 The original Black Orchid
'Black Orchid', *Adventure Comics* #428
Cover art by Bob Oksner
© DC Comics, 1973

Fig. 2 The new Black Orchid
Black Orchid, 149.3, Art by
Dave McKean © DC Comics,
1989

At the end of the 1980s multiple superhero texts were being reworked by British writers: Gaiman and McKean's pitch of the title to Karen Berger was during one of DC's 'headhunting' missions to the UK. Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* had broken new ground; and as Karen Berger comments: "There was really no going back after Alan did Swamp Thing."[2] Gaiman's rewrite echoes the circumstances of *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, in which Moore redefined the Swamp Thing as a 'plant elemental' with powers bordering on that of a god: literally made of vegetable matter, he can regenerate at will and grow a body from any organic substance, anywhere. Moore retroactively inserted his interpretation into DC history by including

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[2] Personal interview available at www.juliaround.com.

earlier versions of the character as previous incarnations and Gaiman follows the same pattern.

However, his *Black Orchid* also subverts the superhero template in certain ways. For example, although the pseudo-scientific nature of the origin Gaiman creates recalls the standard superhero template, this is instead reformulated in feminine terms. At fig. 3 the text states that "PHIL'S DREAM BORE FRUIT" using a metaphor that is both natural ("FRUIT") and feminised ("BORE"). This type of origin also invokes literary parallels with the Pygmalion story, where the male artist creates the female subject, and this gender bias is acknowledged in the imagery of fig. 3 where sexual reproduction and masculine control is evoked by the image of the giant syringe. The reference to Pygmalion may also be a metafictional comment on the recreation of the Orchid by Gaiman and in this way his *Black Orchid* aligns itself with other metafictional treatises such as *Watchmen*; in this case significantly using a gendered metaphor.

In this way the style and format of *Black Orchid* also deviates from traditional comics fare. Rather than using *Watchmen*'s pop art, or *Swamp Thing*'s detailed linework, *Black Orchid* is painted in a photorealistic style by Dave McKean. As demonstrated by these illustrations, the Orchid is costumeless, depicted as a literal hybrid

Fig. 3 A sexualised superhero origin *Black Orchid*, 113.2, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean © DC Comics, 1989

of plant and human in purple shades. McKean's palette ranges from monochrome cityscapes (greyscale is also predominantly used for the male characters regardless of their surroundings, as in figs. 1 and 5) to a blaze of green and purple for the natural scenes, which frequently burst over panel borders into full-page illustrations. This feminised aesthetic is supported by the prestige format of the comic – the single issues and collected version both have a glossy cover and quality pages: a dominant trend at the end of the 1980s, and used by other superhero titles, such as Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*.

Black Orchid therefore fits into the revisionist context of the 1980s comics industry. However, the majority of these rewrites operated by transplanting the superhero tenets into a realistic universe: addressing issues

such as vigilantism, mental health, everyman concerns and so forth.[3] Comics such as *Watchmen* (Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons) functioned as metaphors for the state of the industry: exploring the logical outcomes of a superhero society and addressing the inherent contradictions in the medium, such as its treatment of violence or vigilantism. Despite a new appearance, the genre's motifs and structure remained the same: a threat to be overcome, a struggle between desire and duty, a climactic battle, among others. Although these texts critically considered the superhero genre, they necessarily adhered to the same underlying structural elements.

 Black Orchid instead operates by using a different underlying 'matrix' of elements, drawn from feminine rather than superhero myths. As such, it creates a very different type of superhero story. It exists in the same context as other superhero fare of the 1980s. But while it is equally representative of its context as these texts (in its British creators, literary style, reuse and recreation of superhero characters, and deliberately non-comics aesthetic and format), it simultaneously radically redefines these same elements. By substituting feminine for superhero tropes, it is able to approach issues such as the power conundrum, the duty/desire struggle, and the identity split of the superhero/alter ego from a new perspective. In so doing, it creates a myth that more clearly evokes the feminine superheroic than those that have come before. This article will now proceed to an analysis of the same, using the linguistic theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Myth and Lévi-Strauss

Many analyses of the superhero as myth exist, ranging from the general (such as Lawrence and Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero*, which analyses the various forms of the American hero) to the industry-specific (such as Richard Reynolds' *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, which discusses comics characters). It is however interesting to note that the superhero figure fits within both the traditional and the modern forms of the American monomyth (a pattern that is found recurring in multiple disparate narratives) as defined by Lawrence and Jewett. Whereas the traditional mythic structure (or initiation myth) follows a pattern best described as *separation-initiation-return*,[4] Lawrence and Jewett define contemporary versions as redemptive myths: 'The monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner'.[5] The relevance of both these structures to characters such as Batman or Superman is discussed by Richard Reynolds in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*.

 Lévi-Strauss's critical model combines an anthropological and structuralist approach. His definition is based on a philosophy that supposes

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[3] See for example: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (Frank Miller and Lynn Varley), *Kingdom Come* (Mark Waid and Alex Ross), *The Killing Joke* (Alan Moore and Brian Bolland)

[4] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana, 1993), p. 30

[5] John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 47.

the existence of an underlying logical structure of human consciousness that is shared on a universal basis. This is made up of binaries: underlying concepts paired so as to be defined against each other. In this widest sense, this includes oppositions such as life/death, good/evil, and the masculine/feminine binary, which feminism seeks to deconstruct. Lévi-Strauss explains this paradigmatic model as representing oppositions that are essential to the order of the mind. The cultural diversities he identifies – such as myths, manners, and customs – are therefore viewed as acts of communication that can be analysed to reveal the underlying structure, which he argues is based on a series of binary oppositions that create meaning.

Lévi-Strauss equates the structure of this underlying consciousness with a linguistic system. As such, he defines the diversities perceived in individual cultures as examples of the linguistic terms of *langue* and *parole* coined by Ferdinand de Saussure.[6] These terms are individual expressions of a structuring system such as grammar. In this context, *langue* refers to the sentence-as-system, for example in the form 'subject + predicate', whereas *parole* refers to the individual example once uttered. The superhero can be considered to be one of the modern American myths – part of our postmodern folklore. Even though only a fraction of society reads comics, the majority are aware of the industry's most famous characters and have a general understanding of the superhero concept that is based around its genre rules. These might include the protection of innocent life, the struggle between power and responsibility, and the construction of an alter ego and secret identity. The myths have been formalised for specific characters in order to prevent them from being 'diluted'[7]; for example comics writer and editor Denny O'Neil speaks about the 'Bat Bible' which sets out the character's limits.[8] In this way the superhero genre can be defined as a cultural myth (*langue*), and its characters and their stories constitute various specific examples of the same (*parole*).

The superhero rules noted above have, for the most part, remained unchanged since the genre's inception in 1938, and new creators have instead sought to make their interpretations adhere to this structure. Although a movement towards humanised elements and additional female characters began in the mid-1950s, the genre remained based around this structure; a stasis that was further emphasised by those titles which revisited previously established characters. As evidenced by the patterns observed by Lawrence and Jewett, the superhero myth has a manifest content of heroic individualism. This is instantly overturned by *Black Orchid*'s non-egoistic collectivism and the Orchid's confused, multiple identity.

The superhero myth, and specifically the introduction of the supervillain as the hero's nemesis, provides the basis for the sorts of binaries that are observed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of myth.[9] These might

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[6] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1960), pp. 9-15.
[7] Salisbury, p. 53.
[8] Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, *The Many Lives of the Batman* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 24.
[9] Umberto Eco identifies a similar dichotomy in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, noting that Bond's characteristics are directly opposed to the 'typical qualities of the Villain.' (Umberto Eco, 'The Narrative Structure in Fleming', in *Popular Culture, Past and Present: A Reader*, Bernard Waites, Tony Bennett and Graham Martin, eds, (London: Croom Helm & Open

include order versus chaos; or duty versus desire, which can be found beneath the manifest content of the traditional superhero tale. Lévi-Strauss's model proposes that the manifest content of a myth is an attempt to reconcile its underlying oppositions. By way of example he uses the Oedipus myth, dividing the events of the tale into four columns of meaning, as follows:

Overrated family relations (incest)	Underrated family relations (murder)	Slaying monsters	Difficulties in walking straight and standing upright
Cadmos seeks his sister Europa, ravished by Zeus			
		Cadmos kills the dragon	
	The Spartoi kill one another		
			Labdacos (Laios' father) = *lame (?)*
	Oedipus kills his father, Laios		Laios (Oedipus' father) = *left-sided (?)*
		Oedipus kills the Sphinx	
			Oedipus = *swollen-foot (?)*
Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta			
	Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices		
Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, despite prohibition			

The first two columns are obviously antithetical to each other, and Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that the second two are also opposed. He does this by interpreting the meaning of his final column with reference to other myths, showing that it refers to the autochthonous origin of man (created from the earth), and defines the slaying of monsters as a denial of this belief. He therefore interprets the tale as referring to a culture's inability to find a satisfactory transition between the belief that mankind is autochthonous and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman.[10] The myth therefore relates the two problems; and aligns questions of sex and civilisation, as "the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it."[11]

Lévi-Strauss's methods have been criticised, as the sections he breaks myths down into seem to be arbitrarily assigned according to the requirements of his analysis and it can be said that his method results in a

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University Press, 1982), p. 251)
[10] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, 1963 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited 1972), pp. 213-17.
[11] Ibid, p. 216.

kind of 'verbal juggling' where 'all things are possible and nothing sure'.[12] However, since the invariant mythic structures he searches for do not depend on a syntagmatic division of the tale his method seems valid. In fact, his theories seem particularly applicable to a postmodern climate that regards the notion of non-subjective interpretative certainty as, at best, a misleading and totalised conclusion.

The traditional superhero myth contains the type of binaries observed by Lévi-Strauss; for example as the supervillain enables the creation of the poles of good/evil and life/death within the text. Commenting on Batman, Frank Miller also introduces a third binary pair, saying that: 'The Joker is not so much a Doppelgänger as an antithesis, a force for chaos. Batman imposes his order on the world; he is an absolute control freak'.[13] A focus on personal gain underlies the supervillain's chaotic agenda and when set alongside the superhero's self-sacrificing nature this introduces a further binary: that of duty/desire. The hero is unable to reveal his identity to his friends and family and often lives a sexless existence; forced to sacrifice his desires in favour of his duty. It is best summarised by the superhero tenet coined by Stan Lee: 'with great power comes great responsibility' – or, indeed, repression.

Applying Lévi-Strauss's model to the superhero myth means we must consider its binaries not just as syntagmatic pairs (that is, as oppositions) but also as paradigmatic clusters. As such, the superhero provides a symbolic cluster that might include notions such as 'good', 'life', 'order' and 'duty'; set against a threat that represents a similar cluster of 'evil', 'death', 'chaos' and 'desire'. As in the Oedipus myth, the pairings are aligned with each other and the superhero myth therefore comes to be about the impossibility of reconciling personal desire (chaotic in nature) with a social responsibility towards order and duty. These elements underlie the myth's manifest subject, the content of which is an attempt to resolve these oppositions. At its widest level, this message also underlies both the American *langue* (the perpetual 'American dream' that success is equally available to all hardworking individuals) and *parole* (specific historical instances such as the global dominance of companies like Coca Cola or McDonalds).

The gendering of the superhero myth comes into play in the manner in which it mediates these oppositions. For example, the superhero's role is defined as one of service to society, in order to sanction his aggression. As patriarchal protector of the state, he represents the direct wishes of society, negating the notion of vigilantism. Similarly, the notion of 'with great power comes great responsibility' seeks to reconcile the duty/desire binary. An insistence on the villain's capture and rehabilitation, rather than on his destruction, smoothes over the life/death pairing. Both these strategies use a notion of masculine honour, and this moral code of the superhero also mediates between the order/chaos opposition. It may even be said that the good/evil binary is balanced by the shared qualities or parallels drawn between the villain and superhero. As such, within the superhero narrative we can perceive the processes of myth: just as mythic thought recognises oppositions in the world, mythic structure works to reconcile these.

Lévi-Strauss says that myth 'gives man [...] the illusion that he can

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[12] Edward Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* (London: Fontana, 1970), p. 62.
[13] Pearson and Uricchio, p. 36.

understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe.'[14] Whether it provides social justification and acceptance (René Girard, Bronislaw Malinowski), smoothes the opposition between culture and nature (Edward Leach, Claude Lévi-Strauss), or is enabled to do both (James George Frazer), myth seeks to fill in the gaps in our understanding by mediating binary oppositions: explaining the inexplicable.

This mediation of binary differences is identified by Edward Leach, who describes it as a 'pattern that is built into the structure of every mythical system'.[15] The manifest subject of the moralistic superhero myth is that to do one's duty in the pursuit of order is good and life-affirming, whereas to succumb to chaos and one's desires is bad. However, the subject matter of the myth also operates on a latent level that seems to question its manifest lesson. Is might always right? Is the superhero a figure of democratic protection or one of fascist control? Is violence a satisfactory solution?

These questions are raised in titles contemporary with *Black Orchid* such as *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Kingdom Come*, addressing the myth's underlying binaries, which apply equally to the presentation of both male and female superheroes in these texts. However, they remain unsolveable while a patriarchal superhero figure is retained. The numerous genre rules integral to the superhero myth (which include the protection of innocent life at all costs, the prohibition of guns and firearms, and the rehabilitation or punishment of the villain rather than his destruction) are the most usual attempts to reconcile the myth's implicit contradictions.[16] The taboo on killing is brought to prominence in contemporary titles such as *Kingdom Come*, where the superhuman race becomes divided over concerns about their methods. Clearly *Black Orchid*'s contemporaries were concerned with addressing such issues, but they remained limited by working within the same tired structure.

This article instead proposes that replacing this gendered structure with one drawn from feminine myths allows a mediation between binaries whereby manifest content becomes more explicitly interrogative and sheds new light on the latent meaning, as will now be demonstrated.

Black Orchid and the superhero tradition

Gaiman uses a variety of methods to situate his *Black Orchid* firmly within the superhero tradition. The first of these is his invocation of various character worlds, as he reveals that Sylvian's project began during his time at university, where he studied alongside Alec Holland (the Swamp Thing) and Pamela Isley (Poison Ivy), under the tutelage of Dr Jason Woodrue (Floronic Man). Lex Luthor features as the comic's villain, and Batman also appears to help the Orchid and urge her towards a crimefighting life. The Orchid is thereby inserted into multiple superhero worlds and woven into a rich tapestry of

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[14] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 17.

[15] Edward Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 10.

[16] Chuck Dixon, amongst others, has 'written Batman with a gun', but notes this required special approval (Salisbury, p. 53). Batman's extensive use of gadgetry can be read as an attempt to mediate his lack of a 'real' weapon such as a gun. A similar process is observable in the Bond films (for the indestructible James Bond may also be read as a superhero), where science and humour are used to disguise the fact that his gadgets are actually violent weapons.

comic-book history. However, these elements sit uneasily against the main body of the story, adding to the notion that they function simply as genre 'markers'. Batman appears for only a page, Floronic Man does not even feature, and Lex Luthor is simply the finance behind the mission to capture the Orchid, rather than an idiosyncratic villain. The depiction of the Orchid's encounter with the Swamp Thing seems more coherent with the rest of the text, but this seems due more to the rewrite of both these characters as nature myths, rather than to their superheroic status.

Black Orchid also employs linguistic features of the superheroic, for example in the use of puns such as 'YOU'RE FIRED' as the first Orchid is burnt to death (16.2).[17] This type of discourse of laconic machismo is reminiscent of both the superhero genre and the contemporary action movie industry, and as such is strongly gendered in nature. In *Black Orchid* it mostly features around the male gangsters, such as Carl, for example when he appears at the comic's climax, to the cue 'THERE *ISN'T* ANY CAVALRY' (145.3). Carl's pleas for his old job back, and barroom rants about his already-dead wife reveal an insistence on living in the past; perhaps a metafictional hint that the text will replace this type of outdated machismo with its own feminised superheroic discourse. The punning certainly sits oddly in the comic, juxtaposed with the Orchid's precise and poetic speech.

The mask motif is also employed in this opening scenario, as the original Orchid (who has infiltrated Lexcorp) is discovered, captured and unmasked (12-13). Gaiman's character modifications provide the Orchid with certain powers as a plant-hybrid that were lacking from the original version; like the Swamp Thing she can alter her body (which otherwise appears purple) to pass as human. Nonetheless, her use of a rubber mask and disguise not only keeps Gaiman's rewrite consistent with the original 1970s series, but also invokes the superheroic more generally.

In this way *Black Orchid* is firmly located within the superhero genre. However, reversals abound in this treatment of the superhero. The death of the first Black Orchid is brutal, unanticipated, and shocking. It also has a metafictional status as her murderer says:

> YOU KNOW WHAT I'M *NOT* GONNA DO? I'M NOT GOING TO LOCK YOU UP IN THE BASEMENT BEFORE INTERROGATING YOU.
> I'M NOT GOING TO SET UP SOME KIND OF COMPLICATED *LASER BEAM DEATHTRAP*, THEN LEAVE YOU ALONE TO ESCAPE.
> THAT STUFF IS SO *DUMB*.
> BUT YOU KNOW WHAT I *AM* GOING TO DO?
> I'M GOING TO *KILL* YOU.
> *NOW*. (14.1-2)

And he does. As Mikal Gilmore notes in his introduction to the *Black Orchid* trade paperback, at this moment the killer is also addressing the reader and explaining that the usual genre rules will not apply here.

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[17] References given in this form (for example, 16.2) refer to trade paperbacks where the pages have been renumbered sequentially (page 16, panel 2). In some trade paperbacks page numbering is retained from individual issues and will be cited in a three-digit form (for example 3.15.5 corresponds to part 3, page 15, panel 5). When quoting from comics I have used '/' or a line break to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes, and imitated the use of font and style so far as is possible in order to avoid inflicting my own capitalisation and punctuation on the text.

This revelation, however, is subverted again two pages later when it is revealed that the bullet has not killed the first Orchid and she tries to escape from the burning building. Again, our expectations that she will succeed – after all she has survived a gunshot – are subverted as, on the next page, the entire building is blown up, emphatically and finally dispatching the character. In this way, from its very beginning, both the narrative content and metafictional commentary of *Black Orchid* point towards its intention to redefine the genre.

The comic's aesthetic also subverts the superheroic. Much of the impact of myth lies not just in its argument or validity, but also in its imagery and metaphor – as Wendy O'Flaherty comments 'The power of a myth is as much visual as verbal'.[18] The costumes and iconography of superheroes (such as Superman's distinctive logo and colour scheme, or Batman's mask and bat-signal) are as much a part of their mythic status as their stories, and as such further support their definition as myth, since a costume is the one essential to being a superhero. In this way the medium of comics supports a mythic narrative structure, as it is not only able to create such an iconography, but is also aided in doing so by its traditional pop art style.

Again, *Black Orchid* inverts expectations of this type, as the Orchids are not costumed or linked to any specific logo. Instead they are characterised by splashes of colour in a monochrome cityscape and, in their natural surroundings, simply merge with the background. This aesthetic contributes to *Black Orchid*'s redefinition of the superheroic, using painted artwork that is feminised in its watercolour appearance and use of purple shades.

In *Black Orchid* the natural world is dominant: the jungle literally surrounds the action on the page, as in fig. 4. In this example, the specific events of the panels float above the wider *mise-en-scène*. The first of the four panels is actually a zoom-in from the perspective of the background splash page; the contents are reproduced exactly, with the same tree cutting across our viewpoint in the foreground. After this cinematic close-up, the reader's viewpoint floats around dizzily in the trees for the subsequent three panels. There is actually very little gutter for the reader to fill in as the conversation continues across the panels. The rich aesthetic, our observational position, and this ongoing information feed invoke a notion of excess that is far removed from the standard superhero fare and is in fact more reminiscent of the mode of romance, for example as conceived by Diane Elam in *Romancing the Postmodern*.

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[18] Wendy O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 33

Fig. 4 The visual excess of romance, *Black Orchid*, 140, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean © DC Comics, 1989

Having noted some of the ways in which *Black Orchid* invokes and subverts the superheroic, this article turns now to a closer consideration of the narrative's underlying feminine binaries and the ways in which its manifest content addresses these.

Violence

Rather than relying on genre rules to temper the question of democratic protection versus fascist control, the underlying theme of *Black Orchid* is a message of anti-violence, reversing the more usual superhero subtext where brutality is sanctioned as the use of violence produces peace. Contemporary texts such as *Dark Knight Returns* may question this message (does the end justify the means?) by exploring the limits of defensible methods, but the superhero myth remains unable to resolve this question. In *Black Orchid* (and in fine superhero style)*,* the Orchid nonetheless saves Carl (who has just killed Dr Phil Sylvian and destroyed all the other orchids in his laboratory), saying 'TOO MANY HAVE DIED TODAY. / NO MORE' (78.2-3).

However, her resistance is repeatedly formulated as a retreat, rather than as a heroic gesture. She is not a masculine defender of the state, but instead wants only to retreat from society and reproduce. The climactic showdown where the hero triumphs is replaced by the Orchid's simple defiance as she refuses to go with Luthor's men, saying simply 'DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.' (149.6) Despite their orders, his henchmen refuse to destroy her (fig. 5) but, rather than the more usual taboo invoked by the superheroic (the taking of innocent life), a feminine taboo (of violence towards saintly women) is used, as their refusal is couched in terms of the Orchid's perfection. The book concludes as they simply hand over their guns, bury their dead, and return to Lex Luthor with this message – a non-violent threat:

Fig. 5 A denial of violence, *Black Orchid*, 150.6, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean © DC Comics, 1989

ORCHID	THE GAME IS OVER. I'M TIRED OF IT.
	IT'S FOOLISH AND VILE.
	TELL HIM THAT IF HE *EVER* INTERFERES *AGAIN* WITH ME, OR MY SISTERS, WE WILL *RETALIATE*.
	I WILL RETALIATE.
HENCHMAN	*SURE. YOU'RE* THE ONE WHO'S SO DOWN ON *VIOLENCE*!
ORCHID	I DIDN'T MENTION *VIOLENCE*. BUT IF HE PERSISTS … I WILL FIND *WHATEVER* IT IS THAT HE *LOVES* …
	AND I'M SURE THERE *IS* SOMETHING …
	AND I WILL TAKE IT *AWAY* FROM HIM.
	TELL HIM THAT. (152.2-3)

The Orchid's mercy and peaceful ethic is rewarded by Luthor's hunters adopting a similar reasoning. In the same way, Carl's destructive mission of revenge against Lex Luthor, the Orchid, and everyone else, ultimately results in his death. The life/death binary is in this way brought to the surface in *Black*

Orchid and ultimately balanced. Although integral to the superhero rules that they do not seek to kill, brutality is nonetheless sanctioned by the genre as the superhero's use of violence produces peace. This is not so in *Black Orchid* where violent acts reap a similarly bloody reward. In this sense its moral message aligns with Jacobean revenge tragedy, as Carl's mission of revenge turns back on him.

References to a wider myth of nature also seem to be employed here, for the Orchid shares many of the qualities of the Swamp Thing by being a literal embodiment of her environment. The henchmen's refusal to destroy her ends with the statement 'NOT *HER*. NOT *HERE*' and the visual emphasis aligns the two words (see fig. 5). The Orchids use the trees to rest in, hide in and ultimately to plant new Orchids in – mirroring the traits of the plant. Their superheroic function, too, aligns them with natural structures such as the circle of life, as their plant function (breathing in carbon dioxide and exhaling oxygen) also serves the planet. In this way, the life/death binary that underlies the superhero myth is reformulated using the Mother Nature myth.

This myth is employed as a marker of the feminine, despite its technical inapplicability. The emphasis is on 'mother', as the Swamp Thing gives the Orchid the seeds from which to grow her new sisters, in a clear recreation of male/female parenting. This is emphasised when Abby, the Swamp Thing's partner, on learning that he 'WAS … GIVING HER … *BABIES*', quips 'I *THINK* WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO HAVE A *TALK* ABOUT THIS.' (115.6-8) The mothering role does not seem a particularly progressive gender image, and it does not in fact strictly apply to the Orchid. Although some orchids reproduce by insect pollination between male and female plants, other species are able to fertilise themselves, as an extension of the male flower part (the anther) delivers pollen spores directly into the female cavity. However, this type of asexual reproduction is not referred to and instead the Mother Nature myth is invoked, functioning as a marker, not of the superheroic, but of the feminine.

Power

Black Orchid subverts the superhero power binary, concluding that physical strength is not always right and creating a place within the genre for a different sort of power. Although she has been artificially engineered, the Orchid's powers appear to be natural – coming from the plant elements of her hybrid form. She joins the Swamp Thing in the Green, the plant consciousness of the world, where he tells her the story of her origin (111-113). In this way she is, like him, more than a superhero: a mythic 'GOD' (110.1) representing anthropomorphised natural elements, and a Mother Nature figure.

It should also be noted that, in many ways, the very notion of the Green aligns with the underlying consciousness structure that Lévi-Strauss proposes. The Green is a dimension that represents all plant life, and which the Swamp Thing can enter and control, from which he grows new bodies and life. The Swamp Thing uses it to access the Orchid's mind, and she comments: 'WE ARE TOGETHER IN A NEW WORLD. I HAVE NO WORD FOR IT.' (111.5) In this way the Green is similar to the underlying consciousness structure below language that Lévi-Strauss identifies. He sees humanity as being

composed of unconscious mental 'structures', a shared understanding of binary concepts. These collectively shared perceptions of differences underlie language, and these processes are employed in the creation of myth, whose opposing pairs of elements are related by a process of abstract binary logic.

The parallels between the Swamp Thing and Black Orchid are obvious. However, the Swamp Thing's history is constructed as a patriarchal lineage rather than the kind of non-egoistic collectivism of the Orchids. This is apparent in the heroic individualism and successive nature of the creatures' existence: 'THE UNDERLYING… PATTERN… REMAINS CONSTANT… / A MAN… DIES IN FLAMES… A MONSTER… RISES FROM THE MIRE… SACRIFICE…AND RESURRECTION… THAT IS ALWAYS… OUR BEGINNING…'.[19] Previous incarnations of the Swamp Thing retire to the 'Parliament of Trees' (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* #47) and in this way are positioned as the creature's forefathers, evoking masculine notions of inheritance, dynasty and congress. Conversely, Gaiman's Orchids are grown concurrently alongside each other as sisters. The familial and domestic are introduced, and as such the Orchid simultaneously represents a more human conception of superheroism.

As such she may also be read as referencing the motherland myth, where natural inheritance is set against cultural acclimatisation. It might be argued that this myth too informs the superhero figure where alienation may stem from difference from humanity. The nature/culture opposition that lies at the heart of the motherland myth is also addressed by the comic's narrative, which serves to blur the two – as the Orchid says: 'HOUR BY HOUR I FALL FURTHER INTO, REMEMBER MORE OF THE HUMANITY; ITS CUSTOMS, ITS HABITS, ITS DREAMS.' (81.5) The opposing poles of nature and culture that traditionally underlie the superhero myth are rewritten in terms of a motherland myth, allowing the Orchid to bridge this binary opposition.

As a genetically modified hybrid, the Orchid represents the mediation between culture (human) and nature (plant). She notes how Suzy the child Orchid has 'CHANGED SO MUCH IN THESE FEW HOURS', continuing:

> AT FIRST SHE SEEMED SO MUCH OLDER, SO MUCH WISER…
> SHE REMEMBERED SO MUCH MORE THAN I DID…
> AND NOW SHE'S A CHILD. (86.4)

While surrounded by culture, Suzy accedes to its effects. Once back outside society, in the Amazonian jungle, she becomes the Orchid's equal again, easily communicating in another language with the Indians (153.6) and inquiring about the Orchid's wellbeing ('YOU AREN'T HAPPY HERE, ARE YOU?'), although she still calls her 'MOM.' (153.2) Culture and nature are contrasted in this way, as also seen in the exchange between Abby and the Swamp Thing (115.5-8) already discussed.

The presence of the child sidekick also recalls the superhero myth, as previously noted, but in *Black Orchid* the relationship is redefined as familial. Suzy calls the Orchid various versions of 'MOMMA' or 'MOMMY' (80.1; 82.5), and the Orchid names her fellow plant hybrids her 'SISTERS' (27.5, 57.6, 72.6, 99.2). As an Orchid, then, Suzy is also Sister – although, in fact, the Orchids are actually clones. Their origin, too, is conveyed as a family structure as Phil

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[19] Alan Moore and others, *Saga of the Swamp Thing Volume Seven*, pp. 45-7 (London: Titan Boks, 1988), p. 3.15.5

admits to being the Orchid's 'FATHER' (40.2-3) and she refers to Susan Linden as her 'MOTHER' (58.2). However, Phil stops short of referring to Susan as the Orchid's mother, and the Orchid instead takes on this role for Suzy and her other sisters. The Orchids thereby define their relationship as representative of the feminine and familial in multiple ways, subverting the traditional patriarchal power dynamic.

This is backed up by the symbolic value of the orchid. The genesis of the word is the Greek for testicle and, as noted, the Orchid has an ability to reproduce self-sufficiently. Perhaps, then, it may be that the feminine myth of mothering is invoked and reformulated alongside the superhero power binary, as evidenced by the Orchid's sole responsibility for the tending of her new sisters and the non-hierarchical arrangement of her new family. Although the feminine trope of mothering is evoked, the male/female power imbalance that so often accompanies it is not present and, by aligning the two, the Orchid is able to reformulate the superheroic power conundrum in similar terms.

Multiple identity

The Orchid's first spoken words are 'WHO AM I?' (25.6). Her quest for her own identity addresses another underlying binary of the superhero, whose struggle of duty against desire divides this figure. The division between superhero and alter ego also fractures any possibility of an integrated identity; a state that is emphasised still further since the two halves are frequently directly opposed to each other. This is apparent in some of the genre's most famous examples, such as the playboy Bruce Wayne/vigilante Batman, the timid Peter Parker/brash superstar Spiderman, and the bungling Clark Kent/omnipotent Superman.

The Orchid is aware of her stolen identity (Susan Linden) and, when dreaming Susan Linden's memories, stumbles between narrating as 'SHE' or 'I' (58.7), emphasising her fractured condition. Phil explains to her she is the second Orchid, but her search for answers as to her creation spans the whole of the book, until the Swamp Thing finally explains her origin. However, her confusion is not shared by the child Orchid: in answer to the Black Orchid's statement 'WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE ARE, LITTLE ONE' the child replies 'SUZY. I'M SUZY.' (79.3-4) The child's insistence on naming recurs (82.8, 89.4), and this also recalls superheroic convention, in referring to the literalism of names.[20]

In this way the figures reconcile another duality underlying the superhero figure: that of the alter ego name versus secret identity. For the two Orchids are also in many senses one: sharing memories and grown in identical fashion. Gaiman makes the Orchid's identity overtly multiple: as the child Suzy says 'THAT WAS CARL, WASN'T IT? […] I WAS … MARRIED TO HIM' (75.1), confirming that she and the Orchid share the same root memory.

Gaiman uses the Orchid to represent the superhero as the site of multiple identities, and underlying this is the myth of the May Queen. This myth revolves around notions of natural cycles and underlying it is the binary of life and death. The May Queen represents fertility and the onset of summer

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[20] For example as above (Superman, Spiderman, Batman) which emphasises each character's qualities and gender.

as the seasons pass. Ceremonies revolving around this myth have existed throughout Celtic, Saxon and Pagan eras and symbolise the renewal of life and the ability of all to be reborn. In these rituals a young girl is crowned Queen and leads the Mayday celebrations; and it is theorised that in Pagan ceremonies May Queens were sacrificed once their day was done. Robert Graves discusses the practice extensively in *The White Goddess*, an anthropological study drawn from poetic theory, in which he also postulates that goddess worship underlies all modern religion. There may also be a link between the May Queen and the Roman Catholic May crowning ceremony, where statues of the Virgin Mary are crowned at the start of May, and hymns praise her as the Queen of the May.

Poison Ivy calls the Orchid 'MAY QUEEN' (95.2), as does the Swamp Thing (114.2). The myth's religious implications are invoked when the Orchids become symbols of this type to the rainforest natives who describe the 'FLOWER WOMEN' as '*VERY* HOLY' (130.4-5). The shared identity of the two remaining Orchids and their plant status give this myth a literal embodiment. As reincarnations of Susan Linden and, more accurately, of the first Orchid, they demonstrate the bloom and rebirth of nature that the May Queen symbolises. The myth's underlying binary of life/death is invoked as both are depicted as multiple. Phil's initial creation of the Orchids is echoed when the second Orchid plants new seeds in the rainforests, while the multiple deaths of the first Orchid create a similar conception of death. This binary is ultimately reconciled in some of the Orchid's final words: 'PERHAPS OUR KIND *NEED* DEATH, SUZY. / SUSAN LINDEN GAVE *US* HER LIFE, JUST AS PAMELA ISLEY GAVE *HER* LIFE TO THE SPOILED THING IN ARKHAM.' (135.2) In this way notions of multiple identities and reincarnation (which may be aligned with the superhero origin story) are redefined in accordance with the May Queen myth, replacing the standard superhero structure.

Conclusion

Black Orchid is a quiet, unassuming superhero tale, without any of the brashness or violence that so often underlies the superhero myth. The Orchid herself, the May Queen, represents a new incarnation of the peaceful superhero (of the same type as Moore's Swamp Thing). However, while contemporary texts such as this interrogated the superhero myth from within, *Black Orchid* does so by replacing its tropes with feminised elements. In so doing it subverts the superhero power binary, concluding that strength is not always right and creating a place within the genre for a different sort of power. It employs the Mother Nature myth in the context of a non-hierarchical familial structure, and bridges the culture/nature opposition that lies at the heart of the motherland myth. By existing in overt multiplicity the Orchid stands in contrast to the heroic individualism that more usually characterises the superhero myth and is able to resolve the identity fracture and power conundrum that underlie this genre. In this way, *Black Orchid* both reformulates and comments on the masculine construction of the superhero, and offers one of the fullest and most original explorations of the feminised superheroic to date.

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