

## Review Essay: Charmageddon! Or the day Aleister Crowley Wrote *Wonder Woman*

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Alan Moore, J.H. Williams III and Mick Gray, *Promethea* #1-32. Wildstorm / D.C. Comics, 1999-2005.

Even though graphic novels are currently popular with readers, the 32-page pamphlet comic book is nearly extinct. The cause for this extinction goes back to the 1970s, when the big comics publishers D.C. and Marvel, faced with declining sales, shifted their distribution from mainstream retail outlets to comic book stores. As Gerald Jones explains:

In place of the decades-old consignment system, in which retailers carried no financial risk and nearly half of every print run was expected to be returned for credit, the specialty [comic book] shops began buying comics outright from the publishers on a nonreturnable basis. That shifted the risk from the publishers and distributors to the retailers, but in exchange the retailers got their comics a month before the newsstands and in better physical condition (not an insignificant matter when collectors were becoming a significant part of the market). (327)

The straight-to-the-shops system, called the *direct market*, is both a good and bad thing. Its central disadvantage: kids can't find comic books in drugstores and supermarkets any more, and publishers have lost casual readers. In 1939, *Superman* #1 sold 900,000 copies (Jones 155). In February 2005, the best-selling Superman title was *Superman / Batman* #17 at 116,637 copies, and *The Adventures of Superman* #637 sold 33,265 ("Top 300"). The print runs of direct market comics are unlikely to improve, given their demographic of aging male fans à la Comic Book

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Guy on *The Simpsons*.

One hidden advantage to the direct market is that lower print runs and “narrowcasting” allows publishers to take risks with more sophisticated material. This is where Alan Moore comes in. Born in Northampton, England in 1953, Moore began his career in 1979 by drawing cartoons for *Sounds*, a weekly music magazine. The popularity of *Marvelman* and *V for Vendetta*, two serials Moore wrote for the UK anthology *Warrior*, brought him to the attention of D.C. Comics, who hired Moore to revive *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, a languishing comic book about a heroic muck monster. Moore’s 44-issue run on *Swamp Thing* was successful enough to convince D.C. to launch an entire line, Vertigo, devoted to mature-themed genre comics. Moore worked on other D.C. projects throughout the 1980s, including the perennially popular graphic novel *Watchmen* (drawn by Dave Gibbons), but left the company in 1989 because of disputes over merchandise royalties and D.C.’s plan to label some of their comics “For Mature Readers.”

After a short-lived attempt at self-publishing, Moore returned to corporate comics by writing superhero titles for Image Comics and affiliated presses. In 1998, Wildstorm offered Moore the opportunity to create his own auteur-driven line, called America’s Best Comics. (Wildstorm was then sold to D.C., which, awkwardly, left Moore back with his old employers.) In creating the ABC characters, Moore borrowed heavily from previous comics and popular fiction. *Tom Strong*, co-created by cartoonist Chris Sprouse, is a multi-cultural iteration of Doc Savage, while *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* unites various Victorian-era icons (Mr. Hyde, the Invisible Man) into a super-team that battles menaces like H.G. Wells’ Martians. (Moore’s popularity is such that three movies have been adapted from his comics: *League* (2003); *From Hell* (2001), based on his monumental study of Jack the Ripper with artist Eddie Campbell; and *Constantine* (2005), featuring a supporting character from *Swamp Thing*.) My favorite ABC comic, though—the one which shows how far-out both Moore and direct market comics can be—is *Promethea*, a mystical take on Wonder Woman penciled by J.H. Williams and inked by Mick Gray.

The 32 issues of *Promethea* conveniently break into three story arcs, with the first exposition arc introducing us to the central characters and their world(s). The main protagonist is Sophie Bangs, a college student writing a term paper on *Promethea*, a name and character that, in Sophie’s words, “turns up in 18<sup>th</sup> century poems, early newspaper strips, pulp magazines and comic books.” Sophie interviews Barbara Shelley, the widow of the last scripter of the *Promethea* comic book, and discovers that Barbara herself is a middle-aged, overweight version of *Promethea*. Barbara explains that the superheroine is a “living story” that possesses mortals with imagination enough to invoke her, and that all the historical *Prometheas* were real-life incarnations of this living story. Issue #1 ends as Sophie taps into her imagination by writing a poem that transforms her into a new, caduceus-wielding *Promethea*.

In the issues that follow, Moore and Williams pile on more stuff. Sophie’s science-fiction New York City is run by a mayor with 42 personalities, and protected by the Five Swell Guys, a superhero team whose strongest member is Roger, a woman

who was a significantly different gender before “that Suffragette City episode.” Williams’ artwork packs the mise-en-scene with flying cars, hi-tech hospital machines, and bizarre advertising icons like “Weeping Gorilla,” a cartoon ape who cries while thinking mournful phrases like “Can we hear that Radiohead track just once more?” Layered on top of this NYC simulacrum is the Imateria, the world of imagination and the home of all the previous versions of Promethea, whose stories are told in issues #4-7. *Promethea* #7, for instance, focuses on Bill Wollcott, a male cartoonist who drew the *Promethea* comic book with “so much passion” that he became the superheroine and fell in love with a man. (Gender transgression is a major theme in *Promethea*.) In these early issues, New York City and the Imateria become playgrounds for various adventures, as Sophie battles mystical cults and sci-fi villains.

The first eleven issues also function as Sophie’s apprenticeship, as she gains the information she needs to be an effective Promethea. The most controversial phase of her education is in issue #10, “Sex, Stars and Serpents,” where she has tantric sex with Jack Faust, an aged warlock, in exchange for his knowledge about magic. The story is full of Moore’s offbeat ideas—“It’s only symbolism puts magic and meaning into anything...we can make love amongst the gods, or we can screw on a dirty mattress. It’s our choice”—but being less metaphorically-minded than Moore, I *did* find it difficult to get past the fact that one level of the story is about an old guy screwing a female co-ed on a dirty mattress. So did reader Linda Santiman, who in a letter published in a later issue accused Moore and Williams of trafficking in Hollywood clichés (“old man and very young woman”) and unsafe sex (26). At the end of “Sex, Stars and Serpents,” Jack Faust gives Sophie some books by Aleister Crowley and Eliphas Levi to encourage her studies, but couldn’t she have gone to the library instead?

Beginning with *Promethea* #12, Moore almost completely replaces superhero adventure with explorations in spirituality and magic. Issue #12 is narrated by Mike and Mack, the twin snakes on Promethea’s caduceus, who lecture Sophie/Promethea in verse about “the magic of reality,” from the Big Bang to the near future. Each page uses one Tarot card (from a deck designed by Williams) to symbolize an era in human development. The industrial revolution, for instance, is represented by “The Devil,” a card picturing a naked man and woman held in chains by a horned demon, and this illustration is juxtaposed with Mike and Mack’s commentary on the effects of industrial materialism on the human spirit:

Materialism’s steady creep  
Which William Blake called “Newton’s Sleep,”  
Brings worldly blessings fair and fine,  
Yet blinds mankind to the divine.

Each stage of human history is also given a title, spelled out in Scrabble tiles, that is an anagram of “Promethea.” “Materialism’s steady creep,” for instance, is called “The Mop Era.” The bottom third of each page also includes a painting of Aleister Crowley, progressing from his birth (page one) to his death (page 24), as Crowley tells a joke about the imagination. The *coup de grace* is that the issue is

designed as one giant panel, so when the pages are placed side-by-side, design motifs extend beyond individual page borders, changing *Promethea* #12 into an ever-unfolding scroll. Moore has said that *Promethea* #12 is his “single cleverest piece of work,” and reading it is a dense, disorienting experience (Campbell 24).

The next *Promethea* arc is an eleven-issue journey that fans call the “Kaballah Quest.” As the result of wounds sustained in battle, Barbara Shelley dies in issue #8, and in the Kaballah Quest (issues #13-23) Sophie/Promethea journeys beyond death to say goodbye to Barbara and to learn more about the magical structure of the Universe, which Moore maps out as the ten seifrot of the Kaballah. My own knowledge of Jewish mysticism is limited to reading Gershom Scholem’s *On the Kaballah and its Symbolism* and Myla Goldberg’s novel *Bee Season*, but as I understand it, the seifrot are ten spheres that represent the different aspects of God’s power, and these aspects link together into a network responsible for the creation of the physical universe. Sophie quickly catches up with Barbara at the first seifrot (*Yesod*, the foundation of the Kaballistic “tree of life”) and together they explore the Afterworld, where artists J.H. Williams and Mick Gray cut loose. Each sphere of the seifrot—and, consequently, each issue of the Kaballah Quest—has its own color scheme and visual style. Williams and Gray draw *Netzach* (“victory,” issue #16) as a “sea of green” with fat lines in a Peter Max style, while *Chesed* (“kindness,” issue #19) is a combination of line drawings with Impressionist backgrounds of painted blue. Their layouts are equally inventive, with the möbius path that Sophie and Barbara walk in *Hod* (“splendor,” issue #15) just one of the series’ mind-bending visuals. The Quest ends in *Promethea* #23, in *Kether* (“crown”), the heights of Heaven, as Barbara and Sophie fuse with God and become everything, everywhere, before they return to earth. (The *Kether* scenes are printed exclusively in gold and white ink.) The philosophizing of the Kaballah Quest proved too unconventional even for many direct market comics fans—“we have lost several thousand readers over the course of this saga,” Moore noted—but those who stuck around were rewarded with astonishing visuals and an image of God radically different from the vengeful patriarch of the fundamentalist Christian Right (Campbell 23). I found myself re-reading *Promethea* #23 a lot last November, hungry for visions of mercy and love in the wake of the Bush re-election.

Where do you go after you’ve taken your heroine to Heaven? Inevitably into anticlimax. The third arc (issues #24-31), where Promethea has been instructed by the God(s) to trigger Armageddon, lacks the joy and profligate intellectualism of the Kaballah Quest. Moore seems worn down by contemporary catastrophes. Issue #24 stages the McWorld-Jihad conflict as a struggle between competing Prometheas, and one of the Five Swell Guys died “at the WTC.” Sadder still is Moore’s decision to use the title to wrap up the entire ABC line. In June 2003, Moore announced his retirement from comics, and *Promethea* became the site for his big farewell to all the ABC characters. Comics fans love crossovers—stories where Daredevil makes an appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man*—but I’d much rather hear Moore’s ruminations on the Kaballah than read an adventure story featuring less-than-interesting characters like Greysheet and the Cobweb. (More effective is how Moore and Williams dole out happy endings to Jack Faust, Sophie’s best friend Stacia

Vanderveer, and most of *Promethea's* regular supporting characters.) In answering complaints about the Kaballah Quest issues, Moore noted that “there are 1000 comic books on the shelves that don’t contain a philosophy lecture and one that does. Isn’t there room for that one? (“Promethea”). Yes. So why, in the final arc of *Promethea*, did Moore abandon his lecture notes and try to rejoin the 1000?”

Moore and Williams make up for the disappointing third arc of *Promethea* with their final issue, #32’s “Wrap Party,” one of the most formally innovative comics ever published. Each page of “Wrap Party” is a full page drawing—without panel borders or other subdivisions—of a naked, translucent Sophie/Promethea in various poses: floating, flying, dancing. Behind her are brushmarks of color, with some pages predominately yellow and others blue-purple. Layered on top of this dense visual mix are Sophie’s word balloons, along with sphere-shaped captions, and, on each page, a capsule of text that identifies one of the 32 paths that connect the 10 spheres of the sefriot. The end result is an overload of stimuli designed to overwhelm the audience in ways similar to such radical art/theater events as Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable and the Living Theater’s *Dionysius in '69*, and *Promethea* #32’s debt to the ‘60s counter-culture is made explicit by Sophie’s running commentary on psychedelia: “Adding ‘delos’ (to reveal), Humphrey Osmond, a colleague of Aldous Huxley’s, coined ‘psychedelic’ or ‘soul revealing’ . . . Magic, therefore, is always psychedelic.”

The inside front cover of *Promethea* #32 is a set of instructions on how to make the comic more psychedelic by turning it into a double-sided poster: “Carefully pull it apart and, using the numbers on each page as a guide (it will be four tiers of four pages), tape it all together to form the poster. Additionally, once the poster is completed, you will see two lovely images of Promethea only visible in this form.” Armed with an X-Acto knife, I cut apart the pages and reassembled them, and I discovered two new ways to read and experience “Wrap Party.”

First, the brushstrokes on the page backgrounds come together to create a decorative close-up of Promethea on each side of the poster. Second, the spherical captions on each page are linked with others through trails of stars or ankhs, and when *Promethea* #32 is reconfigured into a poster, these captions are linked across pages and tiers; they become a network of hypertextual rhizomes that bounce around the picture plane unfettered by either page-by-page reading order or the visual rhetoric of the Promethea portraits. And one of those rhizomes reads:

Alchemy is that of “Solvé et Coagula,” to dissolve and recombine. “Solvé” is reductionism, taking things apart for study (or “analysis”). “Coagula” is holism, reconnecting everything into a better and more accurate picture (or “synthesis”). We perform “Solvé et Coagula” as we tear the comic apart to see the “more accurate picture.” In *Promethea* #32, Moore and Williams make us into alchemists.

There’s no way to do justice to the density of *Promethea* in this review. I neglected to mention, for instance, the moments of self-reflexivity in the series: how the god Mercury breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the reader (“Some fictions might be alive. . . .that’s what I’m saying”) in issue #15; how Sophie and Barbara enter *Kether* as stick figures at the beginning of #23; how Moore and Williams themselves make cameos in the book as Promethea begins “Charmageddon” in #30. (The

“charmageddon” pun is taken from Moore’s little-known *Outbreaks of Violets*, but it perfectly describes how Sophie brings the world to an end.) I also forgot to discuss what Moore considers the central miracle of existence: that the Big Bang filled the void in the first place, that something came from nothing. As Sophie and Barbara enter *Kether*, their figures wheel around a mandala as they chant:

Something / from nothing  
 One / from none  
 This / From bliss  
 White / from what.

With *Promethea*, Moore, Williams and Gray have created a very magical *something*, and found an audience for their magic in direct market comic shops. As Moore retires, and the comic industry shifts its distribution into chain bookstores, some of the magic is going away, and I pray to Glycon—a snake-god Moore has adopted as his own personal deity—that material as trippy and subversive as *Promethea* will find a home in the Graphic Novel section of your local bookstore.

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