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From Comic to Graphic and from Book to Novel: *Sandman's* Invisible Authors and the Quest for Literariness

The comic book is dead—long live the graphic novel! These words might make a fitting epitaph for the British-American comics industry's development during the twentieth century. During this time the discourse around comics publishing and the books themselves have undergone a series of aesthetic, commercial, conceptual and cultural changes (Round 2010a). This chapter will explore the move towards bookishness and literariness (both of which, as previous chapters have argued, are connected deeply to the novel-network) in contemporary British-American comics, using DC Vertigo's *Sandman* series as a case study. It argues that this comic enacts the particular status struggles of a collaborative medium against the 'graphic novel' brand. It concludes by mapping its findings back onto the processes and changes at work in the novel's own quest for literariness, and reflecting on what this means for definitions of cultural worth, the performativity of the author function, and our understanding of artistic creation and ownership. Novel, graphic novel, and authorship are linked here to quarrels about literariness and symbolic value that feature as two key nodes in the novel-network: affecting the novel-form, the novel-commodity, and the novel-as-reference-point.

The words we use to speak of many comics today instantly reveal the shift in perception that has taken place. Although weekly and monthly serialized titles still exist, comics stores and mainstream bookstores now also offer an array of collected editions under the umbrella term 'graphic novel'. This product diversification affects the graphic-novel-form and the symbolic value of the graphic-novel-as-commodity. We have moved from comic book to graphic novel—that is, from comic to graphic, and from book to novel—with all that connotes. While "book" is a material object, without a description of content (and could refer to a textbook, a manual, or even a blank notebook), a novel is something different: an aspiration, an escape, a new and unique experience ("novel"). Whereas the "comic" is light-hearted entertainment, the "graphic" is explicit and visual. The graphic-novel-as-reference-point now carries the weight of these expectations, echoed in the numerous news articles reporting that comics have now "grown up" (Pizzino 2016).

The graphic-novel-form has also reflected back onto the aesthetic of both monthly comic books and collected series. Digital art, glossy pages, and elaborate covers now feature on the majority of titles. This makes the comic book commodity feel like a more permanent

and literary product. Ironically, it sits alongside an increase in digital distribution. Some scholars have predicted that we were entering a new wave of distribution in which the comic book transcends its commodity status and may be better understood as sequential art storytelling across multiple platforms (Palmer 2010). Although others claim that digital publishing has not impacted significantly on print sales (DiChristopher 2016), media reports from Europe show a decrease in sales of monthly titles (in Sweden: a drop from 83 periodical series titles in 1989, to 60 periodical series in 1999, to 31 titles in 2019) (Dellert 2020) due to both digitization and the sale of graphic novel collectionss (Strömberg in Dellert 2020). This all demonstrates that the comic-as-commodity has undergone significant aesthetic and form-based changes that bring it closer to the novel-network. Today in the comics industry, single-issue sales must compete with trade paperbacks, which collect complete mini-series or separate story arcs of a maxi-series into a single bound volume. The trade paperback aesthetic is somewhere between a book and a comic: with the dimensions of an American comic book, but typically printed on higher quality paper, with a semi-rigid cover and spine, and totaling around two hundred pages (six or eight single issues). These collections are commonly known as graphic novels, borrowing the label's cultural cachet (even though this term technically refers to a singular novel-length comic) and similarly borrowing their format from another media output, the DVD, often including 'bonus features' such as artist's sketches, variant covers, or the writer's script.

The novel-form of the trade paperback market has also, according to some creators and critics, "actually changed the way the comics are written" (Titan artist/editor Steve White, in Round 2005). Rather than simply beginning a run on an unending series, creators now write "for the trade paperback," typically devising story arcs that fall into six or eight issue blocks. The format has also changed the way that comics are sold, as the move to the direct market that created comics shops in the 1970s (see Palmer 2010 and Palmer 2016) has been followed by a move into mainstream bookstores and online distribution sites, many of which now contain a "graphic novel" section. Literary publishers are also taking note: imprints such as Jonathan Cape (Penguin Random House) and smaller independent companies such as Myriad Editions now publish graphic novels that are primarily focused around "serious" fields such as graphic medicine, memoir and literary adaptation.

In addition to these material and commercial shifts, more mainstream comics also continue to seek literary inspiration for their content. As far back as 1941 researchers and psychiatrists were reading superheroes as modern folklore (Bender and Lourie 1941), noting particular similarities with fairy tale, with magic replaced by pseudo-science. Umberto Eco's

landmark essay "The Myth of Superman" (1972) claimed critical validity for the superhero genre on the grounds of Superman's mythological weight: comparing the text's temporal paradoxes, oneiric atmosphere and archetypal character qualities to the myths of Ancient Greece. This interpretative ideology continues in much of the scholarship around superhero comics today (e.g. Reynolds 1992, Brooker 2001, Morrison 2011). Popular new comics genres such as autobiographix and graphic medicine also reference established literary forms such as the *bildungsroman.* Mainstream publishers DC and Marvel continue their shared universes, but increasingly create (and then abandon) side imprints.[1] New comics now exist against an awareness of an established storytelling tradition and a canonical body of work. As a consequence, knowing and revisionist treatments are common, for example approaching the superhero with an ironic or self-aware tone (*The Boys, The Authority, Planetary*), or combining the figure with theology (*The Wicked + The Divine, Supergod*). Other comics series specifically address or adapt the literary canon (*Sandman, The Unwritten, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*). Rewriting formed the basis of the DC Vertigo imprint, and Dony (2014) applies Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence to argue that Vertigo's self-conscious reworkings are part of a process of canon formation designed to negotiate mainstream/alternative categorizations.

Comics scholarship has also shaped this pathway towards narrative rather than artistic criticism. Today's comics scholars are more often found within cultural or literary studies departments than art schools (Beaty 2007), bringing traditions of textual analysis to bear on the medium. Further, the majority of models that analyze comics from a visual perspective draw on linguistics and semiotics rather than art history or stylistics. The citation systems preferred by many academic publishers and institutions also make comics hard to manage, as the writer's name comes first and others are easily absorbed into "et al." Writers or *auteur* writer-artists also dominate in academic citation indexes and published 'best of' lists (Beaty and Woo 2016). These types of reading lists from public and academic sources (see for example Barnett 2014, Gravett 2011) and public-facing institutions and roles also help shape ~~the~~ a canon. For example the post of UK Comics Laureate was inaugurated in 2014 by the Lakes International Comic Art Festival with academic and corporate support, as "an ambassadorial and educational role for the comic genre . . . to raise awareness of the impact comics can have in terms of increasing literacy and creativity" (Lakes International Comic

[1] These are often themed around genre (DC Helix, DC Vertigo, Marvel Noir, Marvel Razorline), audience/age (DC Minx, Marvel Max) or act as explicit sites of fictional worldbuilding outside the publisher's main storyline continuity (DC All-Star, DC Earth One, DC Elseworlds, Ultimate Marvel, Marvel Knights).

Art Festival). These stated aims privilege the literary over the artistic (which is subsumed within "creativity")[2]; despite this, to date the role has been held by two artists (Dave Gibbons (2015-17) and Charlie Adlard (2017-19)) and one writer-artist (Hannah Berry, 2019-2021).

These aesthetic, commercial and conceptual changes have led to a cultural shift in the perception of comics that is explored by Beaty and Woo in their provocatively titled *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time* (2016). Despite its title, the book does not offer an answer. Rather, it explores the factors that have led to the same "canonized" comics being cited again and again. These include dominant texts such as Art Spielgelman's *Maus* (1980-91), or the work of *writers* such as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman in what is primarily a *visual* medium. Beaty and Woo note the adoption of "a naïve version of *auteur* theory" (2016: 46, original italics) by comics fans to create a pantheon of star writers and artists, with a subsequent drift towards the author as critical discourse around comics privileges the 'novel' over the "graphic." As they point out "today, media discourse (including that of comics critics) routinely treats collaboratively authored comics art as if it sprang fully formed from the heads of its writers—artists are lucky to be mentioned, let along discussed or interviewed as an integral part of the creative process. This is a significant reorientation of the field from the past" (54). Considering production rather than reception, Isabelle Licari-Guillaume (2017) and Christophe Dony (2014) have also argued that comics publishers have used the symbolic value associated with authorship as a self-legitimising strategy.

Many of these debates are apparent in the creation, marketing and critical reception of *Sandman*, which after its launch in 1989 would become the ~~: the~~ flagship title ~~that launched~~for DC's Vertigo imprint, founded ~~back in 1989~~in 1993. ~~*It*~~ *Sandman* ran for seventy-five original issues (plus one special) and spawned numerous spin-off series from various creators, culminating in the release of *Sandman: Overture* (2013) nearly twenty-five years after the series first began. Scripted by Neil Gaiman and drawn by a range of high-profile artists, *Sandman* initially rewrote a golden-age superhero into an immortal deity, although it went far beyond this. It is described by Gaiman as "a machine for telling stories" (2016, 292) that weaves together mythology, literary history, and interpersonal drama: becoming an epic tale of the rise and fall of a god and the impact on the worlds around him. *Sandman*'s epic tone, departure from mainstream superheroics, and extensive use of

[2] This may have also led to the erroneous (or perhaps classical) use of "genre" in this mission statement (in today's theoretical terms, comics are a medium).

intertextual references and literary citations made it intensely popular (Savlov 1999) and have allowed it to claim its place as a canonized "graphic novel."

These elements also foreground the series' storytelling over its artistry. Neil Gaiman's authorship and authority dominate the creation and construction of *Sandman* through tightly controlled scripting practices, extensive narrative asides, and paratextual materials that stress his ownership. Licari-Guillaume (2017) uses *auteur* theory to examine the authorial performance of Gaiman and the other Vertigo writers, focusing on their use of paratexts (interviews, letter columns, blogs) and authorial avatars. She argues that such acts both assert and destabilize writerly authority as the comics often foreground a competing focus on the importance of the act of reading. This chapter instead addresses the novel-network by applying Michel Foucault's more detailed critical concept of the author function to the material product and creative content of *Sandman*, with an emphasis on its visual elements.~~This epitomizes Michel Foucault's author function, meaning that in its paratexts~~ *Sandman*'s artistic contributions are frequently assimilated and ignored in its paratexts: ~~. A~~as Clay Smith points out, Gaiman's celebrants often "illustrate their claims about Gaiman's author(ity) [or authorship] by including panels from his graphic novels (most often from the Sandman series). In doing so, these critics deny the existence of the authors/others (e.g. inkers, colorists, editors) involved in the production of those panels" (2008). But simultaneously the existence of these "others" and the varied artistic style of *Sandman* destabilizes clear-cut authorship and undermines the notion of a singular author function. This chapter will argue that *Sandman* thus articulates comics' ongoing struggle against the graphic novel brand, which can inform understanding of the way collaborative processes are often hidden in the novel-network.

Sandman, the novel-form, and literariness

Adopted as flagship title for the Vertigo imprint, *Sandman*'s literariness was precisely the reference point that DC wanted to promote their new line of comics. Gaiman followed in the footsteps and style of high-profile comics writer Alan Moore: bringing a literary voice and a British accent to the fantastic multiverse he created. This was enhanced by the novel-commodity of the Vertigo imprint, which had a significant aesthetic distance from DC's other titles. No DC bullet logo appeared on the covers of the monthly releases and *Sandman*'s covers in particular were conceptual and often surreal. *Sandman* did not feature its lead character on the cover (a rarity) and Dave McKean's abstract art often dominated over the

title's logo, which on *Sandman: Overture* #5 is "almost blown off the cover" (McKean in Gaiman et al. 2015). Later collected editions of *Sandman* also emphasize literary status through their material qualities. For example the *Absolute Sandman* editions (released 2006) are oversized, hardback books with high quality paper, bonus features and enhanced art and the *Sandman Omnibus* editions (2013) come in two volumes of over a thousand pages each, with leather-like covers in black and red. These graphic-novel-commodities have the feel of ancient literary tomes, bound in rich and sumptuous materials. The aesthetic is continued in the collected *Sandman: Overture* (2013), originally released in hardback with a lavishly colored dustcover.

Sandman's structure and paratexts also encourage a literary reading. The collected trade paperbacks often include short epilogues and prologues, prompting Maaheen Ahmed to claim that "[t]he difference between these issues and the chapters in a novel is small" (2016, 69). *Sandman* also blurred the lines in its accolades: along with a number of industry awards (including four Eisner awards) it controversially won the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction for #19, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (awarded to Neil Gaiman and artist Charles Vess), the first (and only) time this has been awarded to a comic (as the rules were subsequently changed to prevent this). Similarly, the vast majority of *Sandman* scholarship to date has honed in on the series' literary qualities, such as Gaiman's use of allusion, metaphor and overwriting. Entire issues of academic journals and many edited collections have now focused on his work. For example, Stephen Rauch and Peter S. Rawlik Jr and many others have analyzed *Sandman* with respect to Joseph Campbell's hero archetype, and many authors and scholars have drawn attention to the parallels between Gaiman and his protagonist (Barker, Gaiman, Katsiadas, Smith).

The marketing of *Sandman* also embraced and prioritized the trade paperback format and the notion of the literary author. The first *Sandman* collection to be released was in fact the second story arc, *The Dolls' House* (#9-#16), introduced by bonus issue #8 "The Sound of her Wings." Despite being a wrap-up of the first story arc (*Preludes and Nocturnes*), "The Sound of her Wings" was given this privileged position as a personal and idiosyncratic piece of writing. Whereas the first seven issues of *Sandman* draw variously on different storytelling styles, echoing "classic English horror, 1970s horror comics, gritty urban British horror, 1940s John W. Campbell, and the darker side of the standard DC Comics heroes and villains" (Scott), *Sandman* #8 follows a Romantic authorship model and is described by Gaiman in authorly terms, as "the first one where I don't sound like anyone else . . . I'd found my voice" (Gaiman in Schnelbach 2015).

Another relevant aspect of *Sandman*'s marketing was its commercial status as the flagship title for DC's new Vertigo imprint. Vertigo's launch contributed to establishing a literary comics tradition by using rewritten titles (such as *Sandman* itself, originally the identity of a defunct golden-age superhero, Wesley Dodds) and actively seeking out British creators. DC Vertigo editor Karen Berger describes this change as "totally writer-led" (Round 2008, cited by Baetens and Frey 2014, 88), as most of the new talent it brought into the industry were writers. Vertigo followed an ethos that had been established by British writer Alan More's work on both sides of the pond: remodeling and remaking the superhero genre in series such as *V for Vendetta, Miracleman/Marvelman, Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*.[3] The revisionist and literary tone of Vertigo's new publications and their use of the trade paperback format contributed heavily to the mainstream cultural revaluation of comics as graphic novels, and critics such as Candace West have argued that *Sandman* in particular was instrumental here due to the attention the series received from mainstream media such as *Rolling Stone* magazine**.**

Sandman **and Romantic comics authorship**

Sandman and the other Vertigo titles are considered emblematic of the "British Invasion"—a term often used to evaluate the changes that took place in the American comics industry in the 1980s. It is strongly associated with literacy and Romantic authorship: Licari-Guillaume (2018) argues that by using the writer-as-author trope these scriptwriters invaded comics using symbolic rather than economic power. Chris Murray (2010, 44) quips that the "Brit Invasion was also a Lit Invasion" and Steve White also claims the UK writers were able to take that "step away from spandex" by providing critical distance and bringing in "classical, Shakespearean and mythological themes" (Round 2005). These conceptual changes are apparent in *Sandman*'s rewriting of its eponymous character (also known as Dream or Morpheus) into a deity, and Gaiman also rewrites other earlier characters such as Destiny into his Endless pantheon, reframed in metaphysical and literary terms: "The Endless are ideas. The Endless are wave functions. The Endless are repeating motifs." (#48) Literary authors and historical persons also appear as minor characters, alongside numerous figures from literature, religion, folklore and other comics.[4] Nick Katsiadas thus describes *Sandman* as "a

[3] It should be noted that Moore's movement into the American industry followed that of artists such as Brian Bolland and Dave Gibbons.

[4] An indicative selection might include William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Kit Marlowe, Geoffrey Chaucer, Mark Twain, Julius Caesar, Joshua A. Norton, Emperor, Marco Polo, Odin, Thor, Loki, Bast, Anubis, Azazel, Beelzebub, Lucifer,

series that invokes English Romanticism . . . [and] bring[s] to the fore the series relationship with the European literary canon," suggesting that Gaiman's revision of the Sandman character and these intertextual references allow us to read both Gaiman and Dream as Romantic authors (2015: 61).

Clay Smith also argues that we can read Gaiman as his titular protagonist—but with more negative consequences. Smith stresses the dominance of Gaiman's author function and the way it is rearticulated and emphasized in interviews with his collaborators and artists. For example, colorist Daniel Vozzo says "[i]f he [Gaiman] doesn't agree with or like something, he'll let you know it, which is fine. And then you change it because he is the man" (McCabe 2004: 190). Smith also draws attention to the use of Gaiman's name as owner and validator of anthologies such as *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*, arguing that "his author(ity) manifests itself throughout the entire work in implicit and explicit ways."

Gaiman's own comments on the nature of storytelling also strongly evoke the image of the Romantic author, for example his claim that *Sandman* allowed him to '[find] his voice.' Further, he is not the only comics writer to claim this sort of authorship. Speaking of his practice, Warren Ellis comments: "I lock myself in this room and I don't come out until the damn thing's written . . . That to me is what being a writer is" (in Salisbury 1999: 68).[5] Like Alan Moore, both writers have "an unmistakable voice" (Murray 2010: 36). This is ~~, which is~~ emphasized in their comics work through detailed and directive scripting practices that present them as in control, extensive narration, and protagonists who can be read as author surrogates (Ellis's Spider Jerusalem; Grant Morrison's King Mob; Gaiman's Sandman) (Licari-Guillaume 2017). Karen Berger stresses the impact of Moore's comics work on the Vertigo ethos and its emergent stable of writers, saying that Moore "changed the perception of writers in comics. . . . he brought a respectability . . . he really showed that you could do comics that were, you know, literary, but modern and popular, but could really stand next to a great work of fiction, of prose fiction." (Round 2008, cited by Baetens and Frey 2014: 88) However, Moore has claimed that Vertigo simply commodified his pessimistic emotional state (cited in Ross 2001), and scholars have similarly argued that its writers presented their Romantic authorship as part of their 'brand' (Licari-Guillaume 2017). Here the perceived values of the novel-commodity are in counterpoint to those of the novel-as-reference-point.

Cain, Abel, Eve, Titania, Oberon, Puck, Batman, Element Girl, and the Martian Manhunter.

[5] Ellis is part of the "Brit Invasion" and has also produced three novels.

Sandman and the author function

So what does it mean to be an author? Foucault's discussion of the meanings attached to this label can be broken down into four parts, as follows: a consistent style; a consistent ideology/doctrine; an existing historical figure, i.e. a real person; and a consistent standard of writing. Gaiman fits all of these criteria. His style is consistent across all the media he works in: strongly narrated and generally overwriting mythology or fairy tale or literature within the setting of a new fantasy world.

For example his novel *Stardust* (1999) opens with the poem "Song" by John Donne, before proceeding to its first chapter (entitled "In Which We Learn of the Village of Wall, and the Curious Thing That Occurs There Every Nine Years"). In editions such as the first paperback (Headline 1999) both the page design and Gaiman's phrasing mobilize historical and fairy tale tropes. The chapter title is surrounded by a traditional-looking drawn frontispiece, and the first sentence ("There was once a young man who wished to gain his Heart's Desire") begins with an illuminated letter "T." These tropes are also woven into its phrasing and suggestive capitalization. However, the typography also offers an ironic detachment (we are reminded perhaps of A.A. Milne's "Significant Capitals" that allow the author to intrude into the tale) that is echoed in the second paragraph. This reflexively evaluates the clichéd nature of this start ("while that is, as beginnings go, not entirely novel") while still maintaining that the story will offer something different and unusual (as suggested by the "Curious Thing" of the chapter title).

Gaiman's comics writing often takes a similar form, as in this extract from *Sandman*:

> Once upon a time, there was a place that wasn't a place.
> It had many names: Avernus, Gehenna, Tartarus, Hades, Abaddon, Sheol…
> It was an inferno of pain and flame and ice, where every nightmare had come true long since.
> We'll call it Hell.
> (*Sandman* #27)

As above, Gaiman steeps his setting in the weight of tradition, this time by including a number of historical and linguistic translations of the word for "Hell." The same ironic sense

of awareness is also present, as the narrator casually addresses the reader ("We'll call it Hell"): inserting himself in the tale and being both friendly and instructive.

Reflecting on his writing, Gaiman specifically marks this tone as not just literary, but *authorly*, inspired by his childhood reading of authors such as CS Lewis, who:

> was the first person to make me want to be a writer. He made me aware of the writer, that there was someone standing behind the words, that there was someone telling the story. I fell in love with the way he used parentheses—the auctorial asides that were both wise and chatty...
> (Gaiman 2016, 40)

An intelligent yet friendly tone also underpins Gaiman's characteristic themes, such as the humanization of Gods. *Sandman*'s seven Endless are a family who bicker and fight, and ironically the most human of them all is Death, with her boundless enthusiasm for humanity. Gaiman's most recent work *Norse Mythology* also casts an antiquated pantheon in human terms, and in his first novel *American Gods* (2001) the ancient deities of multiple worlds are found languishing in modern-day America, eking out livings as taxi drivers and con-men. This idea is prefigured in *Sandman*, as the character Ishtar says:

> I know how gods begin, Roger. . . . We are worshipped and loved, and take power to ourselves. And then one day there's no one left to worship us. And in the end, each little god and goddess takes its last journey back into dreams …
> (*Sandman* #45)

A notion of gods as symbolic, fluid concepts also appears across Gaiman's work. In *Sandman* he notes "[w]e are expanding—assimilating other pantheons, later gods, new altars and icons. Marilyn Monroe is ours now, as are King Kong and Lady Liberty" (#26). In *American Gods*, we meet the God of Media (incarnated as various icons including Lucy Ricardo and Marilyn Monroe) and Technical Boy (personification of the Internet).

As these comparisons show, Gaiman's ideology frequently reappears in shared themes across his work: employing and extolling the power of fantasy while offering his own personal take as a "wise and chatty" guide. He thus exists as a clearly recognizable figure both inside and outside his texts (alongside celebrity wife Amanda Palmer) as he promotes his work via his blog, social media and public appearances. The standard or quality of his

work also remains consistently erudite: whether children's literature or non-fiction, his writing is clearly literary with frequent reference to established fairy tale and myth.

Sandman, the novel-commodity, and authorial control

In Gaiman's case, the visibility of his author function is not just a marketing tool, but also structures the way that his comics are produced—for example when it comes to idiosyncrasies of style and the extra investment of money and time that these require. The level of control that Gaiman is allowed might only be possible in a medium such as comics, which although collaborative has aspired to literary status and followed theoretical and creative models taken from other disciplines such as film and literature, consequently privileging the idea of the *auteur* and author. Gaiman's role thus both exploits and problematizes the author function. His authorial privileges built up as Sandman's popularity increased, tying into the economic and material aspects of the novel-as-commodity. This can be seen in the development of an increasingly elaborate and intertextual aesthetic to match the tone of Gaiman's prose, and claims that link the success of the story to the book-like format of the collected edition, drawing on Romantic notions of reading.

Smith asserts that Gaiman's constant use of citations, quotations and references to other authors 'demonstrate[s] his command of authors/others—specifically by incorporating them into the body of his work and (re)authoring them.' However, I argue elsewhere (2014: 158) that Gaiman's overwriting of characters goes further than this: it is an act of gothic absorption that also foregrounds the artificial nature of the author function and concepts of literary ownership. Even his choice of Shakespeare supports this, as the playwright was a master adaptor of others' work with only three original plays to his name. Another good example is Gaiman's reuse of characters such as Cain and Abel (originally hosts of the *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets* anthologies, then featured in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and finally incorporated into *Sandman*). This chain of reuse problematizes notions of singular creation and intellectual ownership and exemplifies Foucault's interrogation of the author function as a restrictive category that represents just one way of classifying texts.

Sandman's visual elements support this problematization. Critics such as Smith, Beaty and Woo all draw attention to the way in which comics criticism frequently overlooks the artist, but *Sandman*'s art has also played a significant part in its canonization. This is most notable in the series covers, which were all designed by Dave McKean, and in its lettering by Todd Klein. Gene Kannenberg aligns these elements with Gaiman's author function as identifying markers when he describes them as "the few graphic constants in the books . . .

Between the styles of McKean's photomontage and Klein's letters, readers could tell that a particular issue was a *Sandman* issue even without seeing the title or Gaiman's name" (179).

Dave McKean is an artist whose conceptual and surrealist art is instantly recognizable and has received many awards. Although his techniques are greatly varied, in *Sandman* his art is used as an identifying marker in a rather explicit way, just as the author function operates. In the initial series his artwork evolves and separates out the different story arcs, again framing *Sandman* as a series of books, and more recently his covers provide legitimation for *Sandman* spin-offs such as *The Dreaming* and *Sandman: Overture.* His covers use multiple different methods: early arcs are photographs of found objects and collage in box frames, whereas those of later arcs such as *A Game of You* are better described as "photographic experiments" (McKean 1997: 90), But throughout this process the mixed media element remains strong, for example pen and ink sketches or photos scanned into Photoshop files, made into prints, to which mixed media elements have been added, creating dramatically varied collages.

Designer and letterer Todd Klein has won multiple industry awards for his work, for example receiving the Eisner award for Best Letterer every year between 1993 and 1995 and between 1997 and 2008 alongside multiple Harvey awards. For *Sandman,* Klein devised a unique font for each of the seven Endless characters, as well as many other supporting characters. This process built on his previous work with McKean and Gaiman on *Black Orchid,* where colored speech balloons distinguished the title character. Gene Kannenberg draws attention to the "marked" qualities of comics fonts, which carry potential beyond simply "graceful legibility" (2001: 168), of which this is a good example, as Klein's creation of a pantheon of fonts echoes the content of the *Sandman* series and provides additional characterization. However, although this is a visual attribute of the book, it is based on Gaiman's authorial control. Klein has described how this aesthetic evolved around the time of the fourth collection, *Season of Mists,* where Gaiman "was bringing in all these different gods and characters from other mythologies and wanted each of them to have a different style" (in McCabe 2004: 194). In particular he emphasizes the increased labor attached to this ("I would say 'Well, that's fine, but how often are we going to see this character, because it's going to take me a lot of time and I don't want to spend an extra hour per page' . . . Of course, two issues later the character would be back . . . [Laughs] So at times, it was kind of a problem, but we got through it all and it worked out well.".)

Diversity thereby became a defining trait of *Sandman*'s art within the two constants of its graphic design: McKean's covers and Todd Klein's lettering. However, alongside this

constancy exists a collective of nearly 50 artists, colorists, pencillers and inkers who brought their own style to individual story arcs or single issues. These artists were deliberately selected for their very different characteristics. For example Marc Hempel, artist for *The Kindly Ones*, has an art deco, angular style. Again, Gaiman comments that his selection of Hempel for this arc was quite deliberate: "I wanted a sense of form. I wanted a sense of everything reducing to light and shadow, of everything reducing to simple shape" (in McCabe 2004: 6) Danny Vozzo's flat and bold colors on the same arc emphasize this. By contrast, Michael Zulli's colored pencils for *The Wake* have no inked lines and create an ethereal look for this story arc. Each artistic team was 'chosen for specific stories as the content or theme of a story dictated (e.g. the "cartoony" artist Mike Allred for the light-hearted tale of "Prez, the Teenage President," the fantasy artist Charles Vess for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*)" (Kannenberg 2001: 179). Many of the artists also play with a vast variety of influences and techniques that often take them beyond their own era. For example, Steve Olson describes "A Tale of Two Cities" (#51) as having a "nervous, dreamlike quality" and "Hob's Leviathan" as having a style "fitting for the era" (2005: 77). Smith also notes that Kelley Jones adopted previous artistic styles (for example, those characterizing 19th c. Japanese woodcuts and Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings) as well as drawing on the work of Audrey Beardsley and August Doré in his work on the Seasons of Mist arc (Smith 2008).

With multiple names attached the author function becomes, quite paradoxically, both foregrounded and undermined. Its constancy is replaced by a more varied standard and reception, for example as seen in reactions to the covers to *A Game of You,* which were "generally disliked" (McKean 1997: 90), and the response to the art of *The Kindly Ones*, which were criticized as "artificial" and "distancing" (perhaps because the monthly publishing schedule allowed readers time to forget). However Gaiman claims that "[w]ith *The Kindly Ones* story collected in a book, you're in there and it may be distancing for the first couple of pages but as it goes on, you are in *that world*" (in McCabe 2004, 6, original italics). The collected, more book-like format is cited as essential to the artwork's success (and vice versa). Romantic notions of readership (as complete immersion, and access to a new world) are tied to the collected format and used to legitimize it.

However, the graphic-novel-form, although privileging the writer, has also contributed to the visibility of the artist's contribution by including scripts, sketches and notes. In the annotated script included in the *Dream Country* trade paperback, Gaiman's panel descriptions are interpreted a number of ways by artist Kelley Jones, who makes many

alterations to Gaiman's directions. The contradictions and paradoxes of the author function and notions of authorial control are thus exposed by the processes of comics creation.

Sandman: Overture, legacy, and rearticulating the novel

This brings us to *Sandman: Overture*. Released nearly a quarter of a century after the original series, this six-issue mini-series paradoxically had to both prove itself and maintain links with the original run. It does this by mobilizing many of the novel-form and novel-commodity attributes that characterized the original *Sandman*, privileging book-like connotations in its aesthetic, structure, title, and content. It thus also enacts many of the competing processes that can be found in the original *Sandman*, despite having a consistent creative team (script by Neil Gaiman, art by J.H. Williams III, color by Dave Stewart, and lettering by Todd Klein). These artists' holistic and organic processes extend and develop *Sandman*'s mixed media approach and sustain diversity. Although each has a consistent role they continue to foreground and problematize the author function in the same manner as the multiple artists who worked on the original *Sandman*.

It is immediately obvious that the aesthetics of *Overture* seek to elevate it to literary status. The collected edition comes in a hardcover format with detachable dust cover, and has glossy pages throughout. Its paratextual material also relies on elevating language that claims literary status. *Sandman: Zero* was rejected as a potential title in favor of *Overture*, connoting elitism, opera and so forth. The additional materials in the deluxe collected edition are similarly entitled "Accompaniments: Composing and Performing *The Sandman Overture*," again reinforcing the metaphor. The opening comics content is also framed as weighty and literary, for example the double page spread of Destiny reading his book (#1), where the image of the book takes up approximately two-thirds of the double-page spread, and eight paragraphs of narration on the left hand side overlay Destiny's body. Here the literary dominates in both word and image.

J.H. Williams III is an experimental artist, from his co-owned series *Chase* in the 1990s to later work on *Starman* and *Promethea* and *Batwoman*. This varied and ambitious style continues in *Sandman: Overture* and, I argue, is used to signal connections with the previous series and to reinforce its literary weight while sustaining its variety. The number of covers released for the miniseries also emphasize this notion—issue #1 had nine different covers and each of the rest had around six or seven, most drawn or recolored by Williams with one for each issue by McKean.

The pages of *Overture* contain a wide range of different styles and techniques. These include dizzying double-page spreads that play with use of perspective as befits the cosmic level of this story and which blend multiple visual styles from the series itself (see for example the double splash page in #6). Background and character become inseparable, for example the opening of #4 where Dream meets Father Time. Echoing the inspirations of previous *Sandman* artists, J.H. Williams based the look of this scene on the early work of Peter Max, relying on bright block colors and psychedelic patterning to create a "fluid" and "colorful" scene "that defied comics to a degree, or at least the notion of panel-by-panel comics storytelling." Williams also points out that this style allows for the unobtrusive inclusion of symbolism—another trope of literature and high art rather than comics (Williams in Gaiman et al 2015). Examples on this page might include the autumnal leaves, or the withered tree—all markers of the passing of time.

Dave Stewart's comments when asked about his favorite color are similarly multiple: responding "[t]hey're all my babies. How can I choose?" But he continues that he privileges color combos over original colors, saying "[c]ertain rusty red, yellow green, and mustard yellow hues in combination make me pretty happy" (2015). Again multiplicity is emphasized—Stewart cannot choose one color, just as *Sandman*'s art cannot be singular. *Overture* plays with the conventions of the comics medium and gives a sense of unification of form and content, for example by matching borders and layout to the theme of the page. In Chapter 5, Night's realm is not just appropriately colored in pinks, blues, purples and blacks, but the layout of the page as a whole reinforces the flowing, seductive air (see for example the second double page spread of #5). Panels blossom from a sexually resonant central shape, and their curves echo the lines of Night's body, for example encompassed by her arm in the bottom right quadrant. Roads and pathways also provide borders as in the top right. The whole is both organic and surreal, as the flat pink colors used for borders and the character herself offer no sense of realism.

Overture also disrupts and multiplies our expectations through manipulating the material object and the reading experience, for example by requiring a change of reading direction. This forces the reader to interact with the book physically by turning it in their hands to continue reading—a dizzying experience but one that simultaneously reminds us of the object we are holding (and of course severely disadvantages those non-bibliophilic readers who might have bought a digital copy). Other features of the comic also foreground its material object, such as the mighty gateway pages (which open to create a four-page spread) that appear at the beginning and end of the mini-series. These bring haptic issues to

bear on the reading experience (Hague 2014) as we literally expand the space of the page—just as Dream himself has been expanded.

In many respects these foregrounded and elaborate art styles seem an extension of the varied art and repackaging strategies used in *Sandman* the first time round. One of the most striking examples of this is from letterer Todd Klein, who produced over fifty different character and caption styles for *Overture*, using non-standard lettering for each of the Sandman pantheon, whose typeface and speech balloon tails are all different. This is a continuation of the technique Klein used in the original *Sandman*, where Dream's speech always appeared in white font on a black background.[6] Back then this was achieved manually: the dialogue was hand-lettered, printed in negative, cut out by hand, and then pasted over the artwork. For *Overture* Klein could do this digitally, which also allowed him to merge the text and art still further by using translucent lettering and transparent balloons where it suited the story, for example when Dream speaks to Night on the pages mentioned above. His speech thus seems less certain than usual, and the flowering shape of the panel borders is preserved.

The merging of text and image is also apparent in the title pages to each chapter, which incorporate these labels into the artwork. Again, these use a range of different styles and media to suit the mood, for example the City of the Stars (#4)—"a city made of light," in which no black is used. These contrasting chapter styles extend out to the rest of comic and many pages or double pages bring together a range of contrasting styles and techniques. As Andy Khouri points out: "There's some stuff that's hand-painted, some stuff done in washes, some stuff that's only pencil that's been colored [by Dave Stewart]." The legacy of *Sandman* is clear in dramatic shifts between styles. For example in a double page spread from #4 the artwork shifts from a flat perspective and bold colorway, with no discernable use of background or paneling, to more subtly colored hues as we re-enter the "world" of the comic, combined with an overuse of geometric panel borders. False panel borders and background abstract shapes are used to lead the eye onto the second page. Different characters speak in individual fonts and speech balloon styles.

This mobility also informs the gatefold page from #1 where we can also see the contrasting depiction of the different Sandmen, some of which specifically echo the original series (such as the full moon head, a homage to the cover of *Sandman* #39), although the

[6] The creation of a distinct font for each character was pioneered by letterer Gaspar Saladino in Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum* (DC Comics, 1989).

majority are utterly new. Perspective is also used to emphasize this (for example via the two-dimensional characters at center-left and top right) and scale is also used (the hands of a giant Sandman are shown on the right hand side). Visibility and color also play a role, for example via the translucency of the black ghost-like shape to the center right and the bursts of flame which break up the many shades of blue used on this page.

The opulent and varied aesthetic and the gatefold device scream quality and innovation. Critics hailed *Overture* as "stunning," "amazing," and "well written" (Bailey) and "ludicrously pretty" (Rivera). But there was also criticism: as reviewer Dan Nadel argued that the elaborate art "stifles actual engagement" and that Gaiman's level of control "works against his premise." Here Nadel echoes Smith's comments on the original series by finding both Gaiman's authority and the elaborate art problematic.

Comics-Seeming Novels?

With this in mind, I'd like to end by reframing some of these observations in terms of some recent work that has been done on comics and legitimation and extending my conclusions to the wider cultural search for legitimation apparent in fiction and the changing nodes of the novel-network. Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2005) and Paul Lopes (2009) have done significant work on the historical legitimation of comics, which has been continued by later critics such as Andrew Hoberek (2014) and Christopher Pizzino (2016). Gabilliet's cultural history looks at the structuring social and economic relationships that have defined the development of comics publishing. He considers both internal and external types of consecration and how these contribute to the visibility, recognition, and cultural legitimacy of comics. In summarizing, he points out that while the graphic novel format has shifted comics towards the field of adult culture, the inertia of the monthly market has simultaneously trapped the medium as part of adolescent culture. ~~These~~ The paradoxical nature of these findings ~~are~~ is particularly interesting in the context of Charles Hatfield's (2005) work on the narrative tensions that appear on the comics page (which might contrast word/image or surface/sequence to reinforce particular themes or meanings), or Benoit Peeters' (2007) work which uses a series of binary divisions to break down its workings, or even my own research (2014) that identifies similar internal contradictions shared between comics and the Gothic.

David Ball's work on Chris Ware's comics also notes a tension that he names "comics against themselves"—the tendency to bring in high-minded literary themes while simultaneously undoing them (2010: 106). I interpret this as the type of process we see in

other media, such as the television show *South Park*, or in texts of the "mash up" literary genre such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009). In these texts, canonical beliefs and books are simultaneously acknowledged and undermined (see Lanzendörfer 2018). They enact the contradictory impulse that seems present in ideology and literature today, reflecting a lack of faith in metanarratives as part of the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1979). Szép also notes the particular tendency of comics to be self-referential, arguing that these texts are, first and foremost, about being comics, and should be defined as a rhetorical mode.

Most recently, Christopher Pizzino (2016) develops this body of criticism by using the notion of legitimation as a tool to read the comics page. He defines and argues for a process called "autoclasm" (or "self-breaking")—a split energy that articulates comics' status problems in comics-specific terms on the page. Essentially Pizzino argues that the "coming of age" *bildungsroman* narrative continually applied to comics in the mainstream media is a fiction. The fact that this same "news" is still being reported year after year is indicative of what remains as an ongoing struggle for legitimation (since such articles have been published for 30 years now as "new news," and show no signs of stopping). This is also apparent in comics paratexts and other scholarship. Sandifer and Eklund point out that "[t]he desire for legitimacy has pushed comics scholarship into a contradictory position, in which literary merit is valued, and Gaiman valued for his literary qualities, but the 'low' cultural tradition of popular comics and comic art is devalued" (2008). Andrew Hoberek (2014) demonstrates that many existing critical approaches to *Watchmen* as literature do not stop to question the concept, and instead his own work uses *Watchmen* as a lens to examine what we mean by literature and the consequences of including graphic narrative within this. Beaty and Woo suggest that comics critics and scholars often engage in doublethink by positioning a "great" comic as the exception to the rule (as Karen Berger does in discussing Alan Moore), or by using the language of cinema or prose to analyze it (2016, 32). Hoberek also draws attention to this paradox: pointing out that claims for comics as literature must interrogate the concept itself and ask how the non-verbal elements of comics complicate existing definitions.

Pizzino argues that the "signs of these struggles can be read on the comics page" (2016, 2), which demonstrate a split energy that articulates comics' status problems. He offers four case studies, that include reading *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) through the language of the comics code (and particularly the notorious accusations of Frederic Wertham which are re-voiced through its psychiatrist figure), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) as articulating the disruptive pleasure that comics offer. Using this model, I'd suggest that *Sandman*'s incorporation of literary references can be read as an example of Pizzino's

autoclasm. It thus performs the literary or intertextual play of high-low culture, representing comics' ongoing struggles with the graphic novel label. Fitting Pizzino's model, this is done via a method that is typically "of comics"—Gaiman uses retroactive continuity,[7] but pushed to the nth degree. As well as prior comics and characters such as Cain and Abel, he overwrites other literary texts and global historical events (such as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the sleeping sickness that did indeed appear between 1915 and 1926), explaining them away as a consequence of the events of his narrative. In addition, his combination of diverse mythologies and literatures demonstrates the same type of cross-fertilization that the mainstream comics universes have created (where multiple characters inhabit the same universe). Finally, the dramatically varied art produced by his collaborators also enacts the multiplicity of comics art more generally, where pencillers, inkers, colorists and letterers collaborate on a single text. This is even sustained within the work of singular artists such as McKean, Klein or Williams through their use of collage and mixed methods.

When considered alongside Gaiman's prose literature, *Sandman*'s reputation also exposes the subjective and fluid qualities of literariness: "Even Gaiman, hailed as the most literary of comic book writers, is in prose merely a writer of popular genre fiction" (Beaty and Woo 2016, 64). In the framing and reframing of Gaiman's work across media we can therefore perhaps also see the genre novel's own quest for respectability emerging, for example in his introduction to his novel *American Gods* (2005 edition). This notes that the book won "a number of awards including the Nebula and Hugo awards (for, primarily, SF), the Bram Stoker award (for horror), the Locus award (for fantasy):" pairing paratextual markers of literary worth with pop culture genres (for such genre awards, see also Lanzendörfer in this volume).

In *Sandman* the treatment of word and image demonstrates the particular status struggle of a collaborative medium against singular authorship and the graphic novel label. Through its performance of this autoclasm, perhaps the (graphic)-novel-seeming-comic-book can also illuminate understanding of the author function in the novel, where similar collective processes (the work of editors, agents, readers, reviewers and so forth) are occluded by the single name on the cover. As boundaries between high and low culture blur, and social media and new technologies increasingly reframe reading as a dialogic process and create new possibilities for co-creation, the case study of *Sandman* exposes the limitations of the author function and *auteur*ship in a collaborative medium and a postmodern world.

[7] A practice commonly found in comics: overwriting past events to create a coherent and singular history for a character.

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