Alan Moore's *Miracleman*:
Harbinger of the Modern Age of Comics

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Introduction

On May 26, 2014, Marvel Comics ran a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* for Alan Moore's *Miracleman, Book One: A Dream of Flying*, calling the work "the series that redefined comics… in print for the first time in over 20 years." Such an ad, particularly one of this size, is a rare move for the comic book industry in general but one especially rare for a graphic novel consisting primarily of just four comic books originally published over thirty years beforehand. Of course, it helps that the series' author is a profitable luminary such as Moore, but the advertisement inexplicably makes no reference to Moore at all. Instead, Marvel uses a blurb from *Time* to establish the reputation of its "new" re-release: "A must-read for scholars of the genre, and of the comic book medium as a whole." That line came from an article written by Graeme McMillan, but it is worth noting that McMillan's full quote from the original article begins with a specific reference to Moore: "[*Miracleman*] represents, thanks to an erratic publishing schedule that both predated and followed Moore's own *Watchmen*, Moore's simultaneous first and last words on 'realism' in superhero comics—something that makes it a must-read for scholars of the genre, and of the comic book medium as a whole." Marvel's excerpt, in other words, leaves out the very thing that McMillan claims is the most important aspect of *Miracleman*'s critical reputation as a "missing link" in the study of Moore's influence on the superhero genre and on the "medium as a whole."

To be fair to Marvel, for reasons that will be explained below, Moore refused to have his name associated with the *Miracleman* reprints, so the company was legally obligated to leave his name off of all advertisements. Nevertheless,, but the blatant misdirection of the excerpt minimizes the scholarly importance of *Miracleman*, a title that endured for several decades as one of the medium's most important but largely unread classics. Due to complicated legal disputes, *Miracleman* remained out of print for decades, so interested readers had two options: either hunt down fairly expensive used copies or download illegal electronic versions online. Still, even without an easy form of dissemination, the titled managed to develop

a zealous cult following among readers and critics alike. In *How To Read Superhero Comics and Why*, for example, Geoff Klock calls *Miracleman* a "canonical superhero work" that is "as influential and important as [Frank Miller's] *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and [Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's] *Watchmen*" (190). Both of these works were published in 1986, generally considered a watershed year in the history of comics. This was also the year Art Spiegelman published his first collected volume of *Maus*, a work that would go on to become the first and only "comic book" to win a Pulitzer Prize. But it was Miller and Moore who arguably had a greater and more immediate impact on the comic-book industry as a whole, especially when it came to challenging the industry to rethink the ephemeral nature of traditional comic books. It was, according to Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith, "The Era of Ambition," "the medium's greatest year" (71). Or, as Douglas Wolk puts it,

> It was, it seemed, comics' *annus mirabilis* ["The Year of Miracles], the first year of a new era. From then until the turn of the millennium, those three books became the standard against which comics that wanted to be important or meaningful were measured and the standard to which too many cartoonists who wanted to create something important or meaningful…aspired. (8)

But as Klock's assessment of *Miracleman*'s canonical status suggests, there is an argument to be made for including Moore's pre-*Watchmen* saga in any discussion having to do with what has popularly been referred to as the Modern Age of Comic Books and as the Dark Age by scholars, like Romagnoli and Pagnucci. In short, four years before "The Year of Miracles," Moore's reimagining of the *Marvelman/Miracleman* comics likely influenced Miller's reconstruction of the superhero genre in *The Dark Knight Returns* as well as Moore's own work in *Watchmen*, making it one of the true forerunners of comics' Modern Age.

Background

Marvelman was originally a campy British superhero created by Mick Anglo in 1954 to replace the canceled Captain Marvel line of comics. Virtually identical in all but name, Marvelman would go on to become one of Britain's most popular superheroes until the 1960s when an influx of American comics would help lead to the series' cancelation. Outside of Britain, Marvelman remained relatively unknown until Dez Skinn revived the character in his black-and-white anthology *Warrior*, and Skinn chose an even greater unknown, Alan Moore, to write the series, beginning with *Warrior #1* in 1982. *Marvelman* became an immediate success, solidifying Moore's reputation as one of the industry's most up-and-coming authors. The stories continued to appear in *Warrior* until 1985 when they were renamed *Miracleman* (due to threatened lawsuits from Marvel), colorized, and reprinted in the traditional comic-book format by Eclipse Comics. Working with multiple artists along the way, Moore continued to write the scripts until he voluntarily ended his run in 1989 with *Mir-*

acleman #16, at which point another rising star of the British comic-book world, Neil Gaiman, took on the writing duties before the series ended abruptly in 1995 when Eclipse filed for bankruptcy. Although a critical and financial success, *Miracleman* would remain in "legal limbo" for over twenty years due to exceptionally complicated issues involving copyright and convoluted disputes over proprietorship.

Marvel Comics ended those legal battles in 2009 when it essentially bought out all of the interested parties and made the announcement in grand fashion at the San Diego Comic-Con. A press release on the company's official webpage appeared that same day, announcing, "Marvel Comics has purchased the rights to MARVEL-MAN from creator Mick Anglo and his representatives, finding a home for one of the most sought after heroes in graphic fiction!" ("Marvelman"). The announcement is interesting for two reasons. First, Marvel mentions Anglo by name even though it was highly unlikely that any reader in the United States (or Great Britain for that matter) would recognize his name. In contrast, there is absolutely no mention of Moore who was, by 2009, easily the single most recognizable and bankable name in the industry. Undoubtedly, this was partly due to Moore's contentious history with Marvel, but it also suggests that Marvel was still not certain about the publication rights of Moore's reimagined version of *Marvelman* as *Miracleman*.

In the years that followed, the uncertainty surrounding the future of Moore's *Miracleman* stories only grew, as Marvel published multiple volumes of *Marvelman Classic* (repackaged Anglo stories from the 50s and 60s) with no definitive announcements of what would become of the *Miracleman* comics written by Moore and Gaiman. There were various reports of Gaiman actively negotiating a deal with Marvel to, at the very least, finish his own *Miracleman* run, but Moore's name was ominously absent from any of those rumors. Even when Marvel finally did make announcements regarding the reprinting of *Miracleman* #1-#16, Moore's name was still nowhere to be seen. Instead, Marvel simply replaced his name with thinly veiled references to "The Original Writer," a euphemism that was ultimately used as the official name of the author when *Miracleman* #1 appeared on the shelves in January of 2014. Naturally, one can only assume that Marvel did not like the idea of marketing the series without Moore's instantly recognizable name on the cover. However, Moore's insistence that he no longer had any legal or personal interest in *Miracleman* did appear to clear up much of the lingering legal problems associated with the title, and the comic book community was finally able to purchase (legal) reprints of a work largely considered to be one of the industry's most influential runs, albeit without the famous name of its author on the cover.

Miracleman and the Dark Knight

This is not to say that Miracleman, the character, was "completely" out of print in the time between the last Eclipse issue in 1993 (*Miracleman* #24) and the first Marvel reprint in 2014. In truth, Miracle-

man continued to appear year after year in the pages of one of the bestselling graphic novels of all time, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* which has remained in constant print since it first appeared in 1986. In what is one of the most important visual allusions of the era, Miller gave his readers a glimpse of the inspiration for *The Dark Knight Returns*, a work which has gone on to become one of the most recognized trailblazers of the Modern Age of Comics. Although there are certainly broader ways in which one could see elements of *Miracleman* in *The Dark Knight Returns*, to find direct evidence one need only look at the bottom right-hand panel of page 164.

Here, Miller—working as both author and artist—depicts what seems to be a routine street scene in Gotham City, the focus of which being Commissioner Gordon as he walks home from the grocery store. The panel starts with the inner-monologue of Gordon in the top-left-hand corner of the panel, but the emphasis shifts to the right-side of the panel where four word balloons from random Gothamites

Fig. 1: From Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) © DC Comics

comment on a televised report of a Soviet nuclear strike over Corto Maltese, a fictional island off the coast of South America. Panels featuring Superman attempting to stop a nuclear missile appear before and after this comparatively uneventful panel, so it is understandable if readers fail to notice a young boy on the streets of Gotham wearing what is undeniably a Miracleman costume.

Neither Marvelman nor Miracleman were ever part of the official DC universe, so the appearance of his costumes on the streets of Gotham ran contrary to most of the standard expectations of continuity in comics. Miller, therefore, had to go out of his way to slip this image into the pages of his DC "otherworld." As author and artist, Miller may have simply used his near-absolute control to leave his readers an Easter Egg that only the most ardent fans of the genre would understand, fans Wolk might refer to as *superreaders*: "readers familiar enough with the enormous numbers of old comics that they'll understand what's really being discussed in the story" (105).

In this instance, however, Miller did not need readers with a grand historical knowledge of comics; he needed readers who were aware of current trends and innovations. Moore's revision of Marvelman/Miracleman was less than four years old, and the colorized version of his costume (the one clearly depicted in *The Dark Knight Returns*[1]) did not appear until 1985.

Batman and Miracleman were two characters who were literally from two different comic-book worlds (DC and Eclipse), and while practically every person living in the United States at the time had at least some idea about who Batman was, it is likely that only the most devoted comic-book fans had much of an idea at all about who Miracleman was and, more importantly, why he might inexplicably appear in a completely unrelated story. At the time, informed readers understood that Miracleman represented something new, a serendipitously named hero who embodied perfectly Wolk's "annus mirabilis." Miller's allusion to Miracleman, therefore, was a rather bold move since it inevitably suggested that Miller wanted his story and his "new" Batman to follow that same radical path. With Miracleman, however, Moore had taken a character about whom most of the reading public knew very little beforehand, so in many ways he had a much easier task convincing his readers that they could and should "forget" everything they had previously read. Although there was no real public outcry when the name was changed from Marvelman to Miracleman, Miller could never enjoy that same luxury with Batman, nor would he probably want to. As groundbreaking as *The Dark Knight Returns* was, Batman was still Batman, and the challenges of reimagining such an iconic character would have naturally resulted in more resistance than Moore faced with Miracleman.

Simply putting Batman in a darker, futuristic version of Gotham proved to be challenging enough for many early readers and critics. Even Bob Kane, credited along with Bill Finger as the co-creator of Batman, found Miller's new twist on "his" character both troubling and confusing. In an interview from 1992, Kane called *The Dark Knight Returns* "innovative," but he also admitted that he found most of the graphic novel confusing: "I didn't know what he [Miller] was talking about….I tried to look at it objectively, that it's being progressive. But basically, I don't think so….I didn't understand the storyline too well….I don't know what he's talking about…All in all, I really don't understand Frank Miller" (qtd. in Voger *22*). Another earlier negative review of *The Dark Knight Returns* appeared in the *New York Times* in 1987, written by the novelist Mordecai Richler who seemed to lament that he was being asked to review a "comic book" in the first place:

> Some of the old comic strip artists—say, Bob Kane, creator of Batman—could come up with some real plot zingers. I still, for instance, relish the time that the nefarious Joker took it upon himself to copyright the alphabet. A brilliant notion, I thought. Certainly far more imaginative an idea than any I found in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller…I knew there was something wrong from the opening pages, which, among other

> credits, include "Lynn Varley, Colors and Visual Effects."
> Come on now, we're talking about a comic book, not the
> Sistine Chapel….The stories are convoluted, difficult to
> follow and crammed with far too much text. The draw-
> ings offer a grotesquely muscle-bound Batman and Su-
> perman, not the lovable champions of old….If this book
> is meant for kids, I doubt they that they will be pleased.

Clearly, Richler was working under the assumption that comic books were still being written primarily for children, readers who were approximately the same age he would have been when he last read a Batman "comic strip." Like Kane, Richler also criticizes *The Dark Knight Returns* for its difficulty, as if the nature of the medium dictated just how complex a comic book should be. In other words, because *they* did not understand it, Kane and Richler both considered *The Dark Knight Returns* a failure.

  Even more interesting, however, is that Richler's harshest words come not at the expense of *The Dark Knight Returns* or Miller but, instead, the "truly portentous introduction" written by Alan Moore. Although this introduction only appeared in the first collected edition of *The Dark Knight Returns*, many fans of the genre consider it to be Moore's manifesto on the Modern Age of the Superhero, a commentary as much about his own ongoing work with *Watchmen* as it was about *The Dark Knight Returns*, and almost certainly a commentary on his previous work on *Miracleman*. "Heroes," he writes, "are starting to become rather a problem. They aren't what they used to be…or rather they are, and therein lies the heart of the difficulty" (i). Moore's paradox suggests that, while the public perception of superheroes had changed as the archetype evolved for over half a century or more since the first costumed superheroes appeared in American comics, the industry was reluctant to change the formula. "The world about us has changed," he writes, "and is continually changing at an ever-accelerating pace. So have we. With the increase in media coverage and information technology, we see more of the world, comprehend its workings a little more clearly, and as a result our perception of ourselves and the society surrounding us has been modified" (i). In the postmodern age of the 1990s, such sentiments may have been commonplace, but Moore was not simply arguing for yet one more example of deconstruction; he wanted to do more than simply break the superhero genre down; he wanted to establish new, credible superheroes worthy of becoming contemporary "myth and legend" ([iii]). Recognizing the unique power and influence of such heroes on modern culture, Moore's introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns* makes the argument that comic-book authors and artists are obligated to fulfill this need. "We demand new themes," he argues, "new insights, new dramatic situations….We demand new heroes" (i-ii).

  While Moore points out that other forms of storytelling, such as novels and films, have historically been more than willing to experiment and "reinterpret" themselves "in a contemporary manner," "comic books have largely had to plod along with the same old muscle-bound oafs spouting the same old muscle-bound platitudes while attempting to dismember each other" (ii). Moreover, the "naiveté of

the characters and the absurdity of their situations" were, for Moore, "increasingly embarrassing and anachronistic to modern eyes" (iii). This was especially troubling for Moore who, in an interview from 1981, had already expressed his disdain for both the widespread reputation of comics and the industry's obvious reluctance to adapt and grow:

> It seems to me that there is still some sort of creative stigma attached to working in comics, and that too many of the people in the medium regard themselves as failed novelists, film producers or fine artists. Whereas to me the medium is possibly one of the most exciting and underdeveloped areas in the whole cultural spectrum. There's a lot of virgin ground yet to be broken and a hell of a lot of things that haven't been attempted. If I wasn't so fascinated with the medium I wouldn't be working in it. (qtd. in [Lloyd] 15-16)

At the end of this interview, when pressed to name a specific ambition that he would like to pursue, Moore again expresses a desire to expand the possibilities of comics, and he does so by unexpectedly namedropping Britain's first superhero: "I'd like to see an adult comic that didn't predominantly feature huge tits, spilled intestines or the sort of brain-damaged acid-casualty gibbering that *Heavy Metal* is so fond of. My greatest personal hope is that someone will revive Marvelman and I'll get to write it. KIMOTA!" (qtd. in Lloyd 20).

Dez Skinn was already planning to revive Marvelman in *Warrior* before Moore's interview was published, but—as luck would have it—he was still looking for a writer when Moore let it be known that he was interested in revisiting the character. Steve Parkhouse and Steve Moore (no relation) had already passed on the project, but Steve Moore had seen Alan Moore's interview and passed his name onto Skinn. At the time, Moore was still a relative newcomer to the business, having found early success writing stories for both *2000AD* and Marvel UK, but *Marvelman* was his first chance to write an ongoing story and his first chance to challenge the status quo of which he was so critical in his interview.

According to Moore, his ideas on how to revise the Marvelman character had their roots in *Mad* #4 from 1953 (Khoury 11-12) in a story titled "Superduperman," written and drawn by Harvey Kutzman and Wally Wood. In that story, Superduperman (a clear parody of Superman) battles Captain Marbles (Captain Marvel) in a violent fight that leaves the city of Cosmopolis in ruins. On one level, the parody was likely a commentary on the very public dispute between DC and Fawcett Comics over DC's claims that Captain Marvel infringed on their copyright. But the story was also an intriguing commentary on the superhero in general, especially the notion of what would happen in the "real world" if human beings were suddenly given absolute power to do whatever they desired. Although he was once one of the "good guys," Captain Marbles gives Superduperman a rather metaphorical explanation for his sudden change of heart: "One day while I was punching my way through a mountain," he tells him, "Suddenly it hit me! Why am I punching my way through this Mountain?" (6). Whether it was the futility of the act itself or the

realization that he *could* punch his way through a mountain, Captain Marbles' sudden turn to evil threatens the moral code of superheroes as well as the citizens of Cosmopolis. In the end, Superduperman wins the ensuing battle only by tricking Captain Marbles into punching himself in the face, but he still fails to win the heart of Lois Pain when he reveals to her his secret identity: "So you're Superduperman instead of Clark Bent!...Big deal….Yer still a creep!" (10).

For fans of the superhero genre, like the then 11-year-old Alan Moore, the strip was loaded with dozens of "in-jokes" and sight-gags that only superreaders would fully understand. But, as Lance Parkin (Moore's biographer) notes,

> There is far more going on in the strip than that…. Clark Bent's fawning devotion to Lois and his compulsive desire to sniff her perfume is far from innocent, while echoing the creepiness of the relationship of the 'real' Lois and Clark. By changing the 'camera angle' slightly, the fight between Superduperman and Captain Marbles involves everything a similar sequence in the original comic would, while portraying its 'heroes' as vain, stupid and violent. (Parkin 14)

Such meanings were not lost on Moore who, even at a young age, recognized the depth and possibilities of such a parody. In an interview from 2001, Moore recounted the effects that the *Mad* story had on his earliest theories concerning the reimagining of superhero stories in comics:

> I remember being so knocked out by the "Superduperman" story that I immediately began thinking…maybe I could do a parody story about Marvelman….And then I just completely forgot about the project; it wasn't until 10 or 12 years later that I started working in comics, and the idea started to resurface again. That actually, yeah, it might be kind of fun…to actually not use those ideas to comic effect, but I was beginning to see that they could be used for dramatic effect—something quite startling and poignant, taking a kind of very innocent and sort of simplistic 1950s super-hero and then dropping him in a much more complex, darker 1980s environment. (Khoury 11)

Specifically, Moore remembers having an idea about what would happen if Marvelman forgot his magic word and could no longer turn into a superhero. It was meant to be a running joke like the ones used in "Superduperman," but by the time he returned to the theme over a decade later, as an older and more experienced writer, he realized that there were other possibilities: "It struck me that if you just turn the dial to the same degree in the other direction by applying real life logic to a super-hero, you could make something that was very funny, but you could also, with a turn of the screw, make something that was quite startling, sort of dramatic and powerful" (Khoury 12). Or, using Parkin's term, changing the "camera angle" a bit more turned a juvenile parody into a more complex work of literature that could be appreciated by superreaders and non-superreaders alike.

In the years leading up to the Year of Miracles, Moore's early Mir-

acleman stories, especially the early stories in *A Dream of Flying,* did rely heavily on many of the typical conventions of the genre (Duncan and Smith 226-36), including origin stories, sidekicks, supervillains, and many of the common themes such as the classic superhero-as-underdog plotline which, according to Duncan and Smith, has always played a pivotal role in superhero stories, especially at moments when the heroes are learning how to control their newly discovered powers:

> What makes these protagonists heroes is not their power but their persistence. The superhero is often the underdog, facing a more powerful foe or superior numbers, and experiencing temporary defeat. Superheroes are often beaten in the first encounter with a supervillain, or when the odds seem overwhelming they will briefly give in to their doubts, fears, or selfish desires. Yet they always return to the fray, exhibiting a strength of will that reaffirms the strength of the human spirit. (230)

Almost immediately after re-discovering his superpowers in *Miracleman* #1, Miracleman is forced to battle his one-time sidekick, Johnny Bates (Kid Miracleman), who has been honing his own powers for over twenty years. In a scene reminiscent of the battle between Superduperman and Captain Marbles, with a thundering "DDRUDD!" (41), Kid Miracleman drives his one-time mentor deep into the devastated terrain of London, confident that he has killed his only possible rival. But, of course, Miracleman is not dead, and in the following issue he emerges from the rubble and defeats Kid Miracleman in one "final" battle, but only after the excessively smug Kid Miracleman unintentionally says his magic word, "Miracleman," and returns to his human form.

The second half of *A Dream of Flying* is primarily a re-boot of Marvelman's classic origin story that was, again, copied almost verbatim from *Captain Marvel*. And although origin stories have always played a major role in the superhero genre, Moore's reimagining of Anglo's earlier version of the origin is arguably one of the most groundbreaking aspects of the first volume. Although *Miracleman* is remembered today as one of the earliest comics to feature the gritty violence that so characterizes the Modern Age, such violence did not play a pivotal role in the stories until after the issues published in *A Dream of Flying,* especially in the now infamous (and inevitable) second battle with Kid Miracleman in *Miracleman* #15. But prior to 1986, before his character appeared as a visual allusion in the pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore shook the comic-book world not with ultra-violence but by giving his readers an "honest" consideration of what might happen to superheroes if they were suddenly forced to deal with what Moore referred to as "real life logic," or, at the very least, a more realistic and honest interpretation of what it means to be a superhuman.

Although it was left out of the Eclipse edition of *A Dream of Flying*, *Miracleman* #1 initially began with a "Prologue" titled "The Invaders from the Future," an edited version of an Anglo story from *Marvelman Family* #1, originally published in 1956. And although the plot itself is rather inconsequential to the rest of the graphic novel, it was

probably a useful introduction for readers who were not familiar with Anglo's earlier work. The last page of the story, however, was certainly never a part of Anglo's original design. Over the course of eight equally sized panels, the comic "camera" zooms in on Miracleman's left eye until the image depicts nothing but a blurry, white shape surrounded entirely by the black of the pupil. The page also includes Nietzsche's now famous quote from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* about the *übermensch*: "Behold…I teach you the superman!...He is the lightning…he is the madness!" (15).

Before presenting his readers with his own re-imagined version of Miracleman, Moore challenges his readers to think about the various ways the "superman" has evolved throughout the twentieth-century, beginning with Nietzsche's often misunderstood and mistranslated ideas concerning the "over man" (Kaufmann 309) but also must certainly the development of the "super man" in comics. As Nathan Wiseman-Trowse notes, "Moore juxtaposes Anglo's innocent hero with Nietzsche's…setting up associations that have resonance throughout the series and beyond" (59). This idea is further accentuated by the increasingly magnified image of Miracleman's eye that eventually becomes so unrecognizable that it has no meaning without the context of the entire page. It also obviously invites the reader to read "more closely," to be willing to read more carefully than they would otherwise.

Moore further emphasizes this point by introducing his version of

Fig. 2: From *Miracleman Book 1 (*2014) © Marvel Comics

Miracleman in what is unmistakably a dream sequence and by titling the first chapter "…A Dream of Flying," a title that would eventually be used as the title for the first collected volume. The use of ellipses initially suggests that there was something before the beginning, and although this might simply be a nod to Anglo, it also draws attention to the ambiguous nature of dreams and the unavoidable desire to extract meaning. Freud, for example, in answering the question "Why do so many people dream of flying?" suggested that dreams of flight represent man's "infantile erotic" desires to understand the unknown: "If in the course of their sexual investigation children feel that the grown-up knows something that they are prohibited from knowing or doing, they are seized with a violent wish to know it, and dream of it in the form of flying" (43). Although there are no direct references to Freud, Moore likely had such an association in mind when he titled the chapter the way he did and by beginning his story in the hazy dream (or memory) of Mike Moran, Miracleman's non-superhero persona. Visually and thematically, the dream is a stark contrast to the campy 1956 world depicted in the prologue, and the world Moran wakes up to in 1981 is one that is decisively more "grown up" and harshly realistic. The plot of the prologue, it should be noted, involved an invasion of "Atomic Storm Troopers" from 1981 who returned to 1956 to conquer "the world of yesterday" (5). Apparently unaware of the fact that the Miracleman Family would be waiting for them, the Storm Troopers are easily defeated when Miracleman and Young Miracleman use their super speed to go forward in time to 1981 to stop the Storm Troopers from time traveling to 1956 in the first place. The story is full of the typical time-traveling inconsistencies that plagued so many of the comic books from the era, but, more importantly for *A Dream of Flying*, the 1981 depicted briefly in its panels is a idealistic utopia far removed from the reality presented in the opening pages of Moore's re-imagining of the Miracleman universe. The world Moran wakes up to is encumbered by the realistic circumstances of Moore's modern world where masked terrorists, not Atomic Storm Troopers, threaten their victims with realistic violence and convincing consequences.

   In 1981, this was not the world of supeheroes and not the world that Miracleman is initially equipped to deal with on his own. To help his superhero make this transition, Moore created a new character, Moran's wife Liz, to give his character and plot a conduit into reality. Throughout the early Miracleman stories, Liz Moran becomes the primary voice of "real life logic," a character who, from the outset, embodied the more mature nature of Moore's revision of the Marvelman universe. In the original Marvelman stories written by Anglo, Moran never married, so he never made that traditional transition into adulthood. In contrast, the first time readers see Moran in the present day (1982), he is in bed with Liz as she comforts him after one of his recurring Miracleman-related nightmares. In the original script, Moore describes the scene in a way that highlights the modernity of the setting as well as the maturity of the characters:

> Back in the bedroom, harsh black and white construction
> to contrast against the floating mistiness of the dream-
> frames. Moran is sitting bolt upright in bed, wide-eyed

> with terror. His wife, Liz, an attractive woman of about thirty-five, stirs to wakefulness and concern beside him. As an aside here, I'd really like it if we could show straight away that they both sleep naked, make it really casual and no big deal as to avoid that sort of faintly smelly Conan-type voyeurism. (Khoury 60)

Garry Leach, the original artist, was faithful to Moore's description, showing Moran and Liz's nudity in a way that was safe but also risky enough to raise the eyebrows of readers who were used to the strict guidelines of the Comics Code Authority. In the first panel, Moran sits upright without a shirt, and in the second panel Liz raises her head up just enough to show a bare shoulder. By the third panel, Moran is already fully clothed, but Liz is the most prominent image in the panel; with her back turned to the reader, she stands fully nude as she casually talks to Moran about work. Significantly, when *Miracleman* #1 was reissued by Marvel in 2014, two editions of the electronic version were offered to readers. The one marked as the "Parental Advisory" edition remained the same, but an edited "Mass Market" version (the only version available on Marvel's website) showed the same basic image but with Liz partially clothed in underwear. The censorship, though admittedly minor, does highlight the impact that the image must have had over thirty years earlier in 1982. But as Moore's script indicates, the nudity was never intended to be gratuitous; instead, Moore used these images to help his readers understand, from the outset, that his take on Miracleman was a more adult commentary than what they were likely used to seeing in comics, especially in the superhero genre.

It should also be noted that Leach has admitted to using Audrey Hepburn as his model for Liz and that Miracleman (not Moran) was based on another Hollywood sex symbol, Paul Newman, which he says underscored Miracleman's "godlike perfection" (Khoury 54).[2] Both of these influences, but especially Hepburn, suggest that Leach wanted his characters to embody a mature level of realism (complete with sexuality) that was largely absent in mainstream superhero artwork at the time. Liz, like Hepburn, has a slim figure that is far removed from the "curvaceously thin" female body so typical in superhero comics, a recurring body type that Robin Rosenberg argues creates a "nearly impossible standard of beauty" (86-87). Consequently, the subtle depiction of Liz's more natural body added to the story's realism while also establishing her as a character who functions outside of the typical norms of her gender in comics. Moore also emphasizes this idea by making Liz, an illustrator, the couple's primary source of income, a detail that visibly bothers Moran, who works as a freelance reporter without a steady income. Moran's immaturity further elevates Liz while simultaneously lowering the reader's impression of Moran, not so much because of his income but because of his harsh reaction to Liz when she tries to comfort him. From the outset, Moore and Leach depict Liz as the more mature of the two Morans, and when he ultimately re-discovers his secret identity, Moran (now Miracleman) immediately goes to Liz to help him make sense of the unbelievable past he suddenly remembers.

Fig. 3: Censored Panel from *Miracleman Book 1* (2014) © Marvel Comics

Miracleman begins by telling Liz about how he first gained his powers in 1954 from an astro-physicist name Borghelm[3] who had somehow learned how to command the "key harmonic of the universe" (26). Borghelm tells Moran that he has been chosen to receive "special powers" that are "to be used for the good of humanity," and that he need only speak the magic word, "KIMOTA," to become Miracleman. The origin story takes up most of the entire page, but in a small panel at the bottom right-hand corner, readers discover that Liz has not been taking the story very seriously:

> MIRACLEMAN: Liz? You're laughing. What's
> wrong?
>
> LIZ: I'm sorry, Mike…but that's such a
> bloody stupid story! (26)

Again, the story Miracleman is telling Liz is essentially the same as Captain Marvel's origin story, only—in that version—Billy Batson receives his powers from a wizard, and his magical word is "SHAZAM"[4] which is both the name of the wizard and, in later DC versions, an alternate name for Captain Marvel himself. Although the differences are fairly superficial, one significant difference worth

noting is that Anglo's version relies more on science than the original, a distinction Moore emphasizes even more in his reimagining of Miracleman's backstory and in subsequent revelations about the true nature of his origins in later issues. Eventurally, Miracleman will discover that his origin story was, in truth, completely fabricated and "plagiarized" from an unnamed 1950s-era American comic book. In the second Miracleman volume, *The Red King Syndrome*, the real scientist behind Moran's transformation, Dr. Émile Gargunza explains to Liz the true inspiration behind her husband's "bloody stupid story:" "One day, in the canteen I chanced upon a flimsy, black and white children's paper, left there by some semi-literate engineer. I picked it up. I read.…and then, Mrs. Moran, I laughed and laughed and laughed" (57). The title of the comic book is never given, but the image in the flashback clearly depicts Captain Marvel and his sidekicks, Captain Marvel Jr. and Mary Marvel. As Paul Atkinson notes, these "embedded references to the earlier manifestations of the superhero function as a means of maintaining structural continuity, critiquing superhero utopianism and playing with the postmodern nostalgia for past images stripped of their historicity" (49). In other words, Moore "deliberately satirizes Miracleman's nostalgic reminiscences of this hallucinatory past" (Atkinson 49), and he does so, once again, through Liz Moran, a character already established as *Miracleman*'s embodiment of "real life logic."

In the earlier scene, after Miracleman first tries to convince his wife that he really is a superhero named Miracleman who received his powers from a mysterious benefactor in 1954, Liz's doubts intensify Miracleman's own insecurities about the accuracy of his memory, even though it somehow made perfect sense in the pages and moments before:

> LIZ: Can't you see it? An "astro physicist" pops up and tells you the "key harmonic of the universe"…which just happens to turn you into a muscle-man in a blue leotard? I'm sorry, Mike. I really am. But that's just so stupid!
>
> MIRACLEMAN: I suppose you're right. Actually saying it out loud like that, it does sound… well…pretty unlikely. I never really thought about it before. (27)

Liz finds it especially amusing that Miracleman had a sidekick named Young Miracleman whose real name was Dicky Dauntless, an overtly alliterative and pun-ridden name typical in the Golden Age of superhero comics. And though she later admits to never having read many comic books herself, much less superhero comic books, Liz is still familiar enough with the genre to recognize some of its more laughable clichés. At one point, she teasingly interrupts Miracleman's backstory to ask if he had a pet named "Miracledog," a joke made all the more interesting later in the series when readers discover that Gargunza has, in fact, created a monstrous version of such an animal.

Consequently, in recognizing the cliché-ridden patterns in Miracleman's origin story, Liz can accurately predict elements of his "story" that Miracleman is currently unable to see himself. Her "logical" influence is almost immediate, and Miracleman quickly accedes to the absurdity of his illogical story: "Liz, please! This may, damn it…This does sound silly in 1982, but in the fifties it made perfect sense. This is how I remember it. This is how it happened" (27). But as he tells Liz about the adventures of the Miracleman Family (one that included Kid Miracleman), he is clearly beginning to recognize and understand that something is amiss, especially as he struggles to make sense of his most frequent nemesis, Dr. Gargunza:

> During the years we were together we fought the strangest villains of all time...villains like the Firebug and Young Nastyman…Don't say a word…and the most troublesome of the lot, the freakish dwarf genius called Doctor Gargunza…Time and time again we thwarted his insane plans and jailed him. But somehow he always came back…and yet he never did anything really evil… It was almost as if we were all playing a game. A game which neither side took entirely seriously. (27)

In other words, while Miracleman does not find his own superpowers illogical, at least not at first, he does begin to realize that super villains who are never "really" dangerous is a bit too specious to ignore. In hindsight, Miracleman begins to see that the most implausible aspects of his story are the ones that fail to convey realistic human nature, a sense of verisimilitude that only comes from experience and maturity. Here is where Moore begins to explain how a more "realistic" superhero can exist, and although he does try to "explain away" Miracleman's superpower through science fiction, a genre typically seen as more realistic than fantasy, the true realism of *Miracleman* does not derive from the origin of the characters and their powers but the ways in which those characters interact with one another after those abilities become a part of their reality.

In *Miracleman* #2, Moore and Leach continued to raise the "realistic" expectations of their readers by upping the stakes in another bedroom scene featuring Liz on a page that is mostly taken up by images of her nude body, including an especially exposed silhouette that accentuates the curves of her bare breast.
Although the words in the accompanying boxes come from an omniscient narrator, they are undoubtedly very similar to the ones going through Liz's own mind at the time:

> The brittle February sunlight falls on Liz Moran…warm, asleep, and thirty-six years old…Liz Moran, formerly Elizabeth Sullivan, Liz Moran, professional illustrator and devoted wife…Liz Moran, sixteen years a married lady, her life is happy, comfortable, and resolved…It has been a long time since Liz Moran was surprised by who she woke up next to…her skin remembers a touch that crackled like bare wires. Her eyes remember his eerie phosphorescent grace…she remembers the night before, and she believes.

The innuendo is clear; between the pages of *Miracleman* #1 and *Miracleman* #2, Liz Moran slept with a man who is technically not her husband. Although Moran and Miracleman share the same consciousness, they are literally two people with two different bodies. This encounter will eventually result in a pregnancy that will ultimately lead to their divorce, but—for now—Liz is primarily coming to grips with the idea that she did, in fact, have sex with a super being, an act that only becomes real to her as she recalls the specific, physical details of their "affair."
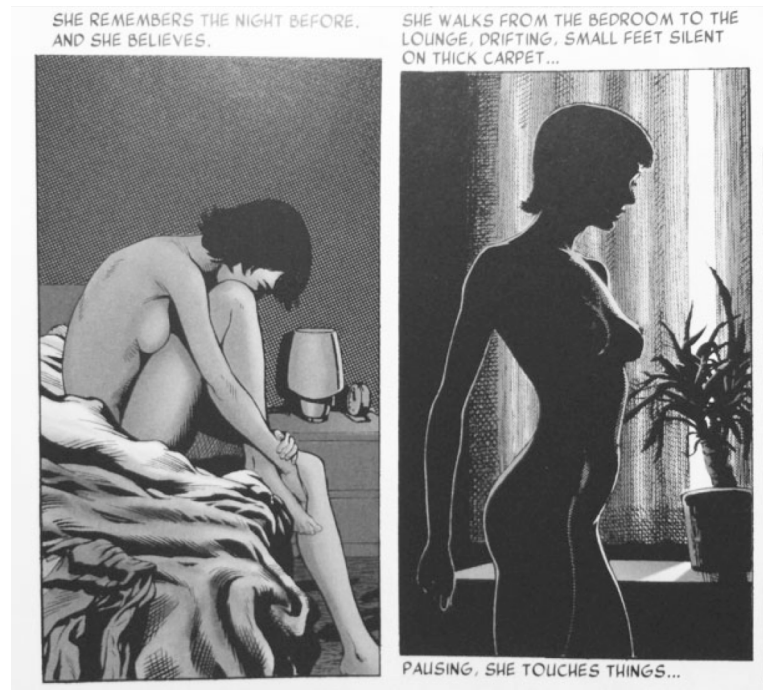

Fig. 4: From *Miracleman Book 1* (2014) © Marvel Comics

In a later chapter titled "Secret Identity," Liz puts her rational mind to use even further by conducting a series of scientific tests to work out the nature of Miracleman's abilities. Recognizing that his powers (and costume) are too similar to stereotypes to be ignored, she begins her "research" in the most obvious place she can think of when it comes to superheroes: "American comics." "I hadn't read any before," she says, "When I was a kid I had a girl's comic…'Sally' or something. Some of this stuff's better than you'd expect, but most of it's crap" (50). Although no one has ever heard of Miracleman, this world (like our own) is aware of the superhero genre, something not always true in the fictional worlds where those comic-book heroes live. But here, in Moore's story, a rationally minded person like Liz cannot help but question the logic behind what was, for decades, simply written off as comic-book physics. For instance, when Mira-

cleman throws a boulder thousands of feet into the air, only to let it crash on his head, he is certain that Liz will now "believe" that he has "invulnerable skin," one of the more common characteristics of superhuman characters. Liz, however, ever the rationalist, explains the illogical nature of such a conclusion: "That rock hitting you should have driven your feet into the soft earth no matter how strong your skin is. You've hardly left a mark. No. Not steel skin. A force field, maybe" (52). Again, although the science behind the explanation of a force field is perhaps more plausible than a "steel skin" gained from speaking a "magic word," what is more important is that Liz is acting and thinking in a more plausible way than the typical comic-book character. Moreover, even when she cannot come up with a "scientific" explanation for his superhuman powers, she can still recognize the absurdity of what she is seeing. Even something like excessively large muscles, a trait that would seem to be a logical one among superheroes, is called into question:

> MIRACLEMAN: But you saw me throw that rock into the sky. You can't explain strength like that with a force field.
>
> LIZ: No. And you can't explain it with muscles like a ballet dancer either. You're well built, but…to do that you'd need muscles like beach balls…like wrecking balls.

In analyzing the nature of his superhuman abilities in this way, Liz begins a commentary that would ultimately play a large role in Moore's more expanded deconstruction of the genre in future works like *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, *Captain Britain*, and most importantly *Watchmen*.

In the remaining chapters that complete the first volume in *A Dream of Flying*, Miracleman finally discovers the truth behind his superpowers and why his memory of those powers were gone for so long. Moran was a part of a government cover up, a failed experiment that ended with the attempted murder of the entire Miracleman Family. A real government scientist named Dr. Emile Gargunza led the research and implanted himself into the memories of the Miracleman Family to test their reactions in a simulated environment modeled after comic books. In an audio recording of the process, Gargunza explains, "The dream world which we have constructed is one in which a pseudo-rational explanation exists for these beings and their abhuman abilities…Some of the fantasies we project contain deliberate contradictions, some contain events to stretch the subject's credibilities to the fullest" (83). Gargunza subtly mocks the Miracleman family for failing to recognize the irrational events of their lives and the inconsistent "contradictions" of their stories. In one broad revision, Moore explains how his story and his world fit into the continuity of decades' worth of stories published in the pages of Anglo's *Marvelman*. In simplest terms, those stories never happened, but they were also real, if only in the minds of the Miracleman family.

Enter Big Ben ("No Time for Crime")

In the last chapter of *A Dream of Flying*, in a last ditch attempt to stop Miracleman from discovering the truth about his past, the government agency behind the Miracleman Project sends in a new superhero of its own design named Big Ben, a muscle-bound, bowler-wearing parody of the British superspy, a mutated amalgamation of Captain Britain and John Steed from *The Avengers*. Dez Skinn conceptualized the character years before he appeared in the *Miracleman* story in *Warrior* #9 in 1983, but he asked Moore to include the character as a way to "springboard" Big Ben's popularity before he was given his own series in the magazine (Parkin 135). Much to Skinn's dismay, however, Moore re-imagined the character before he even appeared in print, using Big Ben as a foil to Miracleman to highlight the superiority of his own character's design in the story itself but also in terms of Moore's revolutionary approach to the superhero genre.

In Moore's version of Big Ben, everything the character believes about himself is false, operating in much the same way as the Miracleman family of the 1960s. Big Ben is under the delusion that he is a beloved British superhero known as "The Man with No Time for Crime." From the outset, however, he is clearly inferior to Miracleman, who literally defeats Big Ben with a flip of his wrist (74). The disparity in powers is explained a few pages later when readers discover that Big Ben was created as a result of a failed attempt to recreate Gargunza's original Miracleman Project. Sir Dennis Archer, the government agent in charge of the failed experiment, admits that— without Gargunza's help—the experiment was not an "unqualified success." Although Big Ben can fly and is "inhumanly strong," his abilities are "markedly inferior to those of his predecessors" (82). Big Ben's greatest shortcoming, however, has nothing to do with his physical abilities but, instead, his inability to deal with the realities of his condition. As Archer explains:

> Due to our limited understanding of the para-reality programing necessary in order to control these remarkable creatures, "Big Ben" received inadequate conditioning… .As a result, his mind became unbalanced. Although this condition makes him ideally suggestible for our purposes, it limits his effectiveness against a rational opponent. (82)

The Miracleman Family, therefore, apparently benefitted from years of conditioning, playing out fake battles in their minds under the guidance of Dr. Gargunza. Big Ben, on the other hand, had to deal with the reality of the real world with powers that were far from rational. In all likelihood, due to his superior physical abilities, this would be fine as long as he fought only "real" opponents who lacked any superhuman powers, but as soon as he is faced with an opponent with superhuman powers superior to his own, Big Ben's grasp on reality quickly disintegrates into madness.

Miracleman reacts to the truth violently but not necessarily unreasonably. The last image of Miracleman in *A Dream of Flying* shows

the hero in a fit of rage, destroying the lab where he was created as he cries out the name of his creator, "GAAARRRGUNZAAAAAA!" (84). This last depiction of Miracleman is a near mirror-version of the last panel in *Miracleman* #1 when, hovering above the earth, Miracleman first remembers his true identity: "I'm Miracleman…I'm Back!!!" (23).

Both scenes depict Miracleman discovering the truth about who he is but with strikingly different results. In the first of the two images, Miracleman's left fist is raised in triumph, and the expression on his face conveys a joyful release brought about by the reawakening of his superhero identity. Conversely, in the second image, the right fist explodes upward in anger, and the countenance of his face suggests both rage and pain, a more complex reaction to his creator's recorded account of his birth:

> By employing the technology gleaned from the visitor and his craft we have completely programmed the minds of these near-divine creatures…providing them in the process with an utterly manufactured identity which is ours to manipulate at will. To whit: the identity of a children's comic book character… comic book character…comic book character… comic book character. (84)

Miracleman's violent reaction causes the final three words of the recording to skip, emphasizing Moore's decision to turn his series into a commentary on the medium. The readers naturally understand that they are still reading a comic book and that Miracleman is, obviously, still a "comic book character," but although the fourth wall is not broken down entirely, Moore is clearly using his re-imagined history of Miracleman to force readers to rethink their former expectations in regard to the medium, especially the superhero genre.

Given his superhuman powers, Miracleman's realistic and violent response to what might otherwise be an irrational plotline further evokes the realistic logic that so characterizes the early chapters of *A Dream of Flying*. Again, the final pages do not depict Miracleman's first moment of rediscovery; this is the second time that he has been forced to confront the reality of his own existence. The first time he remembered who he was, and the second time he learns what he is. Ultimately, by the end of the first volume, readers are left not knowing how Miracleman will respond to his second epiphany, not knowing whether or not he chooses to accept anything as truth or if he goes the route of Big Ben and loses his mind almost entirely. On the last page of the first volume, Big Ben is carried away in a straight jacket by two government workers in lab coats. In his mind, however, he is being treated and rescued by two of his fellow superheroes, Jack Ketch and Owlwoman, his "colleagues from the Bulldog Brigade" (85). The top of the page is split into two distorted halves, one showing the illusions taking place in Big Ben's mind and the other showing the straight-jacket reality of the real world. In the former, his colleagues assure him that the origin story he overheard in the lab was an illusion brought about by a "Brain Beam" to make him doubt his identity. In the latter, the unidentified man and woman

Fig. 5: From *Miracleman Book 1* (2014) © Marvel Comics

in lab coats strap a defeated and disfigured Big Ben into a straight jacket before putting him into a truck to "take the poor bastard home" (85). Unlike Miracleman, Big Ben learns the truth only to have it wiped away due to his inability to rationalize the absurdity of his illogical identity. Without a Liz of his own, without a channel for "real life logic," Big Ben fails to transcend the irrational logic of the superhero genre.

Conclusion

In the years to come, Moore's penchant for reimagining characters would become a hallmark of his work, essentially wiping the slate clean while, at the same time, finding innovative ways to allow the past to remain a part of his re-imagined stories. In the early 1980s, *Captain Britain* and *Swamp Thing* both enjoyed critical success and increased popularity as a direct result of Moore's reboots, but it was in 1986's *Watchmen* that Moore would use his experiences with *Miracleman* to their fullest potential, creating a "realistic" revision of the superhero genre that would ultimately become one of the most critically acclaimed graphic novels of all time. As Bradford Wright notes in *Comic Book Nation*, "Moore's superheroes immediately appeared different from other comic book superheroes. They talked and behaved like real people—or more appropriately, like real people who were strangely motivated to don colorful costumes and fight crime" (271). Contemporary readers have not only come to appreciate this valuable contribution to the medium, they have largely come to expect it, even in the fundamentally unrealistic superhero

genre. Two of the most influential graphic novels of the twentieth century, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* played key roles in altering the public's perception of "comic book" superheroes while simultaneously winning over the respect of critics who may have had little, if any, interest in the genre beforehand. In contrast, *Miracleman*'s relative obscurity as a result of legal issues has unjustly left the work largely ignored by general readers, and only the more resourceful scholars have managed to incorporate its influence into their examinations of the early years of the Modern Age of Comics. Marvel's 2014 re-launch of *Miracleman*, however, should encourage general readers and scholars alike to reexamine the title's clear influences on what are already established classics of the genre. In doing so, *Miracleman* might finally earn the reputation it so richly deserves as a classic in its own right and as a harbinger of what would ultimately become one of the medium's most ambitious and rewarding eras.

Notes

[1] For reasons that are explained in the comic, Moore's version of Marvel-man wore a slightly different costume than Anglo's original version, the most obvious difference being the chest insignias. The original Marvelman's "MM" appeared at a diagonal while Moore's version has the top "M" directly above the other. It should be noted, however, that Miller's version is not an exact copy of either costume, but the insignia he uses is Moore's.

[2] Leach claims that part of his reason for basing the characters on Hollywood icons was due to the precedent established by C. C. Beck who supposedly based Captain Marvel on Fred MacMurray (Khoury 54).

[3] In the original Marvelman series, the astro-physicist was usually named Guntag Barghelt, although the name was rarely spelled with any consistency.

[4] "Shazam" is an acronym for Solomon (wisdom), Hercules (strength), Atlas (stamina), Zeus (power), Achilles (courage), and Mercury (speed).

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