

Anarcha-Feminism in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*

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In 2012, only 24.6 percent of elected Canadian Members of Parliament were female, illustrating a modern-day discrepancy in the political representation of women (*Parliament of Canada*). This statistic demonstrates the deep-seated effects of patriarchy which are still very much at play in modern institutions of power in western society. The insidious effects of male hierarchy figure heavily into Alan Moore and David Lloyd's highly politicized graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, which serves as a warning against patriarchal power. Published in full form in 1988 and first conceived of at the height of Thatcherism in England, *V for Vendetta* places emphasis on feminist issues and the oppressive patriarchal system that continues to be pervasive today. Although *V for Vendetta* carries a political message that champions anarchy, feminism has a strong presence in the graphic novel; the text deals self-consciously with feminism through both the storylines of the female characters, and through the sexist, gendered language used by the protagonist and antagonist parties. In order to convey a pro-feminist message, the text presents patriarchy as an evil that goes hand in hand with authoritative power structures; power that is exemplified by the objectification and violence towards woman by many of the antagonists and men in positions of authority throughout the graphic novel.

In Peggy Kornegger's article "Anarchism: The Feminist Connection" (1975), she offers a working definition of anarchism by depicting its primary ideals. Kornegger claims there are three major anarchical principles:

- (1) Belief in the abolition of authority, hierarchy, government. Anarchists call for the dissolution (rather than the seizure) of power ... of human over human, of state over community ...
- (2) Belief in both individuality and the collectivity ...
- (3) Belief in both spontaneity and organization. (Kornegger 3)

It is clear, from Kornegger's outlining of the major ideals of anarchism, that feminism's call for gender equality figures into anarchism.¹ Therefore, if feminism at its core seeks gender equality, by its very nature, it also figures into the principles of anarchy. The political message of support for anarchy in the graphic novel allows for the imagination of a space where the feminine is free from the authority of the male hierarchy. The fascist political powers at work in *V for Vendetta* not only parallel elements of Thatcherism in England at the time of the text's conception, but also denote how an extreme society and government have the potential to be damaging to the feminist cause. Equality is an essential part of anarchism, as it allows for freedom of individuality, so long as one does not encroach on another's freedom. The concept of gender equality in *V for Vendetta* highlights the goal of complete equality inherent in anarchy, and how the lack of such equality leads inevitably to the type of fascist, oppressive society that exists in the text. Throughout the graphic novel, Moore and Lloyd associate anarchy with the importance of absolute integrity to one's cause: an imperative that has long been at the core of feminism.

As pioneer second-wave feminist, Germaine Greer, states in her book *The Female Eunuch*, "the consequences of militancy do not disappear when the need for militancy is over. Freedom is fragile and must be protected. To sacrifice it, even as a temporary measure, is to betray it," (Greer 20-21). *V for Vendetta* echoes the requirement of adherence to one's cause at all times, mainly as demonstrated through the character Valerie. Before dying whilst in prison, Valerie writes and leaves behind a letter, not knowing who will find it after she dies. In her letter she writes, "it was my integrity that was impor-

¹ Feminism is defined as, first and foremost, the "advocacy of equality of the sexes" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and should not be misconstrued as the valorization of the female sex over the male sex (an objective patriarchal society has historically attempted to attribute this notion to the feminist movement, birthing such derogatory terms for feminists as, for example, the term "feminazis").

tant ... It's all we have left in this place. It is the very last inch of us. But within that inch we are free!" (Lloyd and Moore 156). Valerie's letter goes on to draw a distinct parallel to Greer's statement on political and personal integrity, as she writes, "[a]n inch. It's small and it's fragile and it's the only thing in the world that's worth having. We must never lose sight of it, or sell it, or give it away" (Lloyd and Moore 159-60). This congruency with Greer's assertion that there exists only absolute adherence to freedom, or the betrayal of it, while perhaps not a direct nod to Greer, certainly implies the direct relationship between anarchism and feminism. Feminism, in its goal of achieving equality, is aligned undeniably with the aims of anarchy, and the methods by which to achieve both are similar: an unshakable adherence to the *inch*; absolute integrity at all times to one's cause.

In *Reinventing Anarchy: What Are Anarchists Thinking These Days?* (1979), Dr. Howard Ehrlich denotes a common theme in anarcha-feminist thought:

They affirm the truth of the radical feminist principle, 'the personal is political.' Politics extends far beyond a set of narrowly defined events; it encompasses everything we do in our daily lives, everything that happens to us, and every interpretation we make of these things. All of them have political meanings, because they are integral parts of the culture in which we live. (233)

Ehrlich's assertion that, as far as equal rights for women are concerned, "the personal is political," is well represented in *V for Vendetta*, mainly through the everyday treatment that the female characters receive. Although misogynist sentiments are never expressed explicitly by the Head,² the everyday actions and words of the char-

² The government system in the graphic novel is ideologically fascist, and meticulously controls every facet of society primarily through fear and force. Its various sects are named after body parts: the Head corresponds to the worshipped leader and the heads of government, while the Finger, referenced later, is the equivalent of the military and police force.

acters indicate a society bearing the weight of the over-reaching, oppressive effects of patriarchy. Many of the male antagonists in positions of authority within the Head use sexist language in regards to women; for example Mr. Prothero calls the girls in his story “bints” (Lloyd and Moore 20), a derogatory British slang term for girls and/or women. Additionally, when Alistair Harper describes a woman being shot in the street for stealing a tin of beans, he refers to her as a “poor cow” (193). Such examples often escape a reader’s attention, as they may seem initially insignificant; however, upon further examination, the fact that such charged language escapes the audience’s attention is exactly why the “personal is political” (Ehrlich 233). Although these subtly sexist referents may be read in *V for Vendetta* as mere effects of a society plagued by patriarchy, the language used to describe the female characters in the text only serves to undermine their right to equality, and gestures towards the fact that a more insidious system of government oppression of women exists. As such, the effects of patriarchy are so deeply entrenched in society in *V for Vendetta* that it trickles down from the systematic oppression of women by the government, only to come out of the mouths of characters in the text.

Government systems of female oppression are illustrated in the text through the plight of characters like Rosemary Almond. After her husband, Derek, head of the Finger, is killed by V, she is left with nothing. Rosemary explains the double bind of her new status as a widow: “[t]hey won’t give me state support, Derek. And I can’t get a job. No experience, you see. I had a home to look after” (Lloyd and Moore 104). Rosemary’s lamentation that she has been left with nothing due to the death of her husband highlights the historic struggle of women who were ostensibly forced to be financially dependent on men. Her monologue continues to emphasize the hopelessness deriving from the oppression of women in *V for Vendetta*:

“when you’re a widow, the world looks different. You step through a curtain and you’re in a place where people treat you differently ... You [Derek] were my lifeline. I was stuck at home. You connected me to the world” (100-104). Rosemary’s perceived severance from the world after the death of her husband makes her seek financial support and connection elsewhere—with Roger Dascombe. Rosemary is so afraid of “going into the dark” (106), that she is willing to sleep with Dascombe, even though he “revolts [her], makes [her] feel dirty ... And [she] know[s] he’s only doing this to get back at [Derek] even though [he’s] dead now” (106). Rosemary’s relationship with Dascombe not only reveals her position within a society where women are dependent on men, but goes a degree further by establishing how Dascombe uses Rosemary for another purpose.

The clearest indication of the oppression of women in *V for Vendetta* is after Dascombe is killed, and Rosemary is forced to dance for men at a club, due to a lack of economic opportunities: “and the widows who refuse to cry will be dressed in garter and bow-tie and be forced to kick their legs up high in this vicious cabaret” (176). Rosemary’s inner monologue while performing at the club further illustrates the double bind faced by women who do not have a man to be dependent upon in *V for Vendetta*: “now [Derek’s] dead and I crouch like an animal and offer my hind-quarters in submission to the world. Now you’re dead and I can’t sleep for being scared; for crying; hating; thinking ‘who has done this to me?’” (205). Rosemary’s question of “who has done this to me?” is a key indication that there exists an external force responsible for her bleak situation: that is, the present power structures. Rosemary’s assassination of Adam Susan, the leader of the Head, confirms her realization that the institutions of power are to blame for the oppression of women which has led directly to her lack of economic options.

Although many of the text’s antagonists use sexist language, sexism is also perpetuated to a certain degree by both protagonists, Evey and V. V uses gendered language to describe “lady justice,”

calling her a “liar! Slut! Whore!”(40); he also uses gendered language to describe anarchy, whom he posits “has taught [him] more as a mistress than you *ever* did! *She* has taught me that justice is meaningless without freedom. *She* is honest. *She* makes no promises and breaks none [added emphasis]” (41). Evey, more subtly, perpetuates the type of thought that long-standing male hierarchy has fostered when she observes Rosemary being escorted by Dascombe outside a club: “I’m glad she’s got somebody” (127). Evey, before her transformation, can be considered a product of a patriarchal society: her relief that Rosemary has “got somebody” (127) highlights her conditioned belief that a woman must find happiness in a man. This is furthered by Evey’s appreciation when Gordon becomes her lover: “[I’ve been] alright since *you* took me in, anyways [added emphasis]” (127). The implicit and explicit sexism exhibited by V and Evey demonstrate how patriarchy has pervaded every aspect of society, as neither character can escape its effects, even while serving as *V for Vendetta*’s protagonists. Their susceptibility to sexism indicates how complicated it is to abolish power structures: it is not just the external world that must be freed from authority and government, but the mind must also be rid of hierarchical thought. In the grand scheme of *V for Vendetta*, patriarchy and its oppression of women is just one way in which the government controls its female citizens, and therefore must be abolished.

Sexism in the form of male chauvinism is certainly abundant in the text; however, it is through Helen Heyer’s character that Lloyd and Moore establish the true meaning of feminism: gender equality. Helen is a problematic character in that she conforms to conservative ideals, and uses her sexuality to manipulate and control men in order to achieve power. Helen’s manipulation of her husband, Conrad, is a clear indication of her aims: “I want *you* in the number one seat ... I suppose I shall have to do everything, as usual. You know, you’re quite a successful young man, Conrad. If your success wasn’t *entirely* due to my efforts, I might fancy you” (199). Here, Helen not

only indicates her intention to use Conrad to attain a position high up in the Head, but we are also given insight into how Helen uses emotional manipulation in order to oppress Conrad. By patronizing Conrad and throwing in “I might fancy you” (199), Helen establishes the existence of such an emotionally manipulative relationship. Helen’s exploitation of Conrad continues: “things need arranging, so I’ll see you [Conrad] tonight, and who *knows*, you lucky boy ... maybe I’ll be in quite a good *mood* [added emphasis]” (239). By implying that she might engage in a sexual act with Conrad if her plot to assassinate the present Finger chief Peter Creedy succeeds, it becomes clear that Helen manipulates Conrad by using her sexuality in order to achieve her goals. By creating a character like Helen, who depicts a woman dominating a man, Lloyd and Moore demonstrate that all instances of gender inequality are problematic, and as feminism seeks to create equality between the sexes, the text depicts a proper understanding of its true meaning. Through the sexually and emotionally manipulative Helen Heyer, the text identifies that women, too, can be sexist, and in order to achieve the equality and abolition of hierarchy that anarchy calls for, feminism must be understood as complete gender equality.

Aside from existing as a vehicle for demonstrating that there must not be sexism from or against any gender, Helen Heyer can be read as a reference to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher’s government was widely criticized for being extremely rightwing and lacking action in issues such as childcare and abortion. Thatcher’s brand of perceived extremism is precisely what *V for Vendetta* sets out to deconstruct. The most direct allusion to Thatcher is Helen’s ridiculing of Peter Creedy, asking, “[h]ow would someone like Creedy hope to run a country? Re-open the *football league*? [added emphasis]” (225).³ This allusion to Thatcher’s ban on football, and

³ On May 31, 1985, two days after a stadium in Brussels collapsed, killing 39 people, Prime Minister Thatcher announced an indefinite ban on English football club teams playing club games (*BBC News*).

Helen's comment about re-opening the football league, establishes a direct connection between Helen and Prime Minister Thatcher.

Helen and Thatcher's joint disapproval of football functions to maintain a distinct correlation. However, a much more problematic set of values lies beneath their disdain of the sport. In her article "Margaret Thatcher was no Feminist" for *The Guardian*, Hadley Freeman quotes British journalist and member of the conservative party, Matthew Parry: "[Thatcher] rather liked men (preferring our company, perhaps, to that of women), [but] she thought us the weaker sex" (qtd. in Freeman). This description of Thatcher resonates with Helen's character, who caters to all but her husband's sexual desires, and who consistently berates him for his lack of intelligence: "you stupid piece of shit, don't touch me!" (Lloyd and Moore 256). Thatcher herself is quoted as saying, "[w]e [women] have to show them that we're better than they are" and "[w]omen can get into corners that men can't reach!" (Freeman); these comments, and similar ones made by Helen Hayer in *V for Vendetta*, perpetuate the sexism that the text views as fundamentally problematic and adverse to both the anarchist and feminist causes. Thatcher's supposed opinion that women are "better than" men contradicts her actions, for "[i]n 11 years [as Prime Minister], Thatcher promoted only one woman to her cabinet" (Freeman). Using Helen Hayer as the embodiment of Margaret Thatcher in *V for Vendetta* is an effective way of communicating how sexism is intrinsically problematic when originating from either gender. Furthermore, the text also takes a political stab at Thatcher, who managed to simultaneously disseminate sexism against the male sex, while maintaining conservative, patriarchal values that revealed "her real attitude towards women, which lay behind her notable lack of female-friendly policies, her utter lack of interest in childcare provision or positive action" (Freeman). Helen Hayer's character serves as direct criticism of Margaret Thatcher and her lack of action in creating equality among the sexes. This direct criticism is unique to the graphic novel in that it permits

a certain liberty of opinion.

The use of a character who alludes to Margaret Thatcher in *V for Vendetta* underlines the ability of graphic novels to bypass censorship to a certain degree. As Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter point out in their dissertation, “Alan Moore and the Graphic Novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension,” the artistry of graphic novels

does not make the comic book or graphic novel superior to all art, but unique in its absolute expression of ideals that modernist writers and artists sought independently (and therefore less successfully) in their writings and sketches. (1)

This “absolute expression of ideals” is prevalent in *V for Vendetta*’s highly politicized content. As previously noted, Helen Heyer is depicted as a villain in the text, which reflects the view that Thatcher herself is a villain. At first glance, one may read Helen as a manipulative, problematic character who exhibits and represents sexism, and therefore is the enemy of feminism; however, through subtle nuances and allusions, a direct political agenda can be traced in *V for Vendetta*. The graphic novel opens up an imaginative space free from the authority of censorship, therefore constituting the medium as an anarchical space in and of itself. Lloyd and Moore’s criticism of Thatcher by way of the graphic novel uses Helen’s (and therefore Thatcher’s) lack of egalitarian values to demonstrate the perils of inequality, which “anarcha-feminism” (Ehrlich 236) strives to overcome. The correlation Ehrlich notes between the similarities of anarchism and feminism is apparent in Moore and Lloyd’s work:

People who are familiar with social anarchism and radical feminism are invariably struck by their essential similarity. Both see social and economic inequality as rooted in institutionalized power relationships; both stress the absolute necessity of smashing these power relationships as a precondition for liber-

ation; both work for the realization of personal autonomy and freedom. (Ehrlich 233)

Although the major political theme in the graphic novel is anarchy, feminism figures prominently in the text, the same way it does in anarchism. Both require the “abolition of authority, hierarchy, [and] government” (Kornegger 3) in order to achieve individual equality, which includes equality of the sexes. *V for Vendetta* underlines the need for absolute adherence to the ideal of feminism that anarchy supports. Through both the text’s protagonists and antagonists, the deep-seated effects of male hierarchy are addressed in order to highlight how pervasive, problematic, and damaging the nature of power relationships are, including patriarchy. The oppression of women is a point raised by Rosemary Almond, who falls victim to a patriarchal society that leaves women no choice but to be wholly dependent on men. Conversely, in order to convey a message of equality, female sexism is suggested to be just as problematic as male sexism. The evils of sexism against any gender are illustrated through the character of Helen Heyer, who doubles as direct criticism of Margaret Thatcher: Helen is a character who adheres to conservative principles, catering to expectations imposed by the male hierarchy and functioning within it, meanwhile using gender as a tool for manipulation.

V for Vendetta is a graphic novel that uses its genre to facilitate a political message for feminism and anarchy. It is a depiction of a dystopian society that serves as a warning against institutionalized power structures and relationships. It is a visceral graphic novel that presents us with deeper messages about feminism and anarchism, through a dystopian society with a multitude of problems that are not dissimilar to issues of inequality that persist today. As Germaine Greer points out: “[t]he fear of freedom is strong in us. We call it chaos or anarchy, and the words are threatening. We live in a true chaos of contradicting authorities, an age of conformism without community, of proximity without communication. We could only fear chaos if we imagined that it was unknown to us, but in fact we know it very well” (Greer 21).

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