

The Medium Versus the Message:  
Gender Norms in *Y: The Last Man*  
by Karen Rustad

Most of comics history has been divided between two different gender ideologies. Mainstream comics, featuring highly masculinized superheroes and beautiful damsels-in-distress, tended to entrench existing gender norms. Underground comics such as “Hothead Paisan”, in contrast, tended to break down gender stereotypes with a wider range of male and female characters and alternative comic art styles. Brian Vaughan and Pia Guerra’s *Y: The Last Man*, as part of a recent resurgence of interest in graphic novels, seems to bridge the gap between these two comic camps. Although the content of *Y: The Last Man*’s first volume tends to deconstruct feminine stereotypes, the book’s unspoken psychology adheres closely to traditional gender norms.

On its surface, *Y: The Last Man* holds to a progressive, gender-deconstructing ideology. The book is replete with strong, non-stereotypical representations of women. Many of the female characters display exceptional physical strength, from Rep. Brown’s Tae Bo flip of her son, to the Amazons’ beating and nearly killing Yorick, to Agent 355’s impressive fighting and disarming abilities (Vaughan and Guerra 21-2, 51, 83). Women characters in *Y: The Last Man* show intelligence; they are capable of leading nations and armies; they are at the forefront of biological research. The female characters do not necessarily use these skills for good; the stereotype of women being more cooperative than men does not hold. Some women, like Rose and Rep. Brown, are concerned for the common good (66, 92-3). Others, like the Republican wives or the garbage truck supermodel, worry themselves about petty matters or care only for their self-interest (47,

63). The female cast is not all made of “sugar and spice,” nor is it purely evil. *Y: The Last Man*’s women are capable of the entire range of human behavior and emotion.

*Y: The Last Man* also deconstructs gender stereotypes by mocking Yorick’s traditionalist views about women. On three separate occasions, Yorick voices the assumption that he (as a man) is irresistible to all women. First, when the garbage truck supermodel holds him at gunpoint, he immediately assumes that she intends to rape him (47). Next, when he learns that the Washington Monument has been converted to a memorial for the men, Yorick smugly replies, “Ah. Always about *that* with you ladies, isn’t it?” (89). Yorick’s statement clearly reveals his belief that all women are interested in men (and, therefore himself). Finally, his later assumption that the man-hating Amazons are all “pissed-off lesbians” reinforces this belief--in his mind, the only way a woman could resist the allure of the phallus is by being homosexual (94). On all three counts, however, Yorick proves incorrect--the garbage truck girl doesn’t want him sexually, Agent 355 shoots him down (“Hey, we didn’t build the thing [the Washington Monument]”), and, according to Rose, the Amazons are “not gay. They’re insane” (89, 94). Yorick also assumes that women are inherently more peace-loving and cooperative than men. When he sees the militia of Republican wives demanding their husbands’ seats, Yorick is astounded:

“Are you serious? After all the men died, I thought you guys would be holding hands down at the United Nations or something. When the hell did women get so petty and... and power-hungry?”

“Didn’t you vote for Hillary?”

“Point.” (63-4)

Here the book attacks the stereotype of women being more pacifist by appealing to a “real-world” (unrelated to the plague plot device) counter-example. The book also

addresses this stereotype when Yorick is being beaten up by a gang of Amazons. Only when Yorick is lying on the ground, bleeding, and about to be murdered does he finally “rethink...[his] no-hitting-women policy” and strike back (97). Clearly women are as much a threat to Yorick’s personal safety as any man could be--especially when they are members of an extremist gang. Yet only the school of hard knocks teaches Yorick that “just because [he’s] got a dick doesn’t mean that [he’s] invincible” (100). Yorick’s assumptions of phallic allure and female pacifism come off as ridiculous, thereby deconstructing those stereotypes.

Finally, *Y: The Last Man* tacitly critiques sexism in present-day society. The book does contain explicit feminist messages, such as Dr. Hamad’s statements on the sexist penal code upholding the practice of “honor killings” (19). However, the work’s most general advocacy of feminist ideology is left mostly unstated. According to the back of the book, the gendericidal plague kills 48% of the world mammalian population. This by itself is a staggering death toll, of course. The disproportionate number of men in positions of power, however, makes the plague even more disastrous. In a series of post-plague images from around the world, we see the Tokyo Stock Exchange filled with bodies and only one scientist left standing at NASA mission control (32-33). Almost all the big names in rock and roll, most of the chain of succession to the American presidency, and a majority of the members of Congress are killed off (45, 63, 92). Instead of taking men as the default (and women therefore as the Other), through the men’s deaths the book makes their gender significant. It thus points out just how disproportionately male present-day powerholders are and how much structural sexism remains in Western societies.

In spite of this progressive content, *Y: The Last Man*'s adherence to traditional narrative and artistic norms serves to reinforce gender stereotypes. Beth and Yorick's relationship follows storybook norms dating back to medieval codes of chivalry. The book postures tall, handsome Yorick as a "knight in shining armor" who must undergo terrible ordeals and journey great distances to reach his beloved. Beth, as his physically ideal, Australia-bound girlfriend, plays the part of the "princess in the high tower" well: as far as the reader is concerned, she is a passive, static object of desire. Her long blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin help support the princess analogy. The reader identifies with Yorick, as the story primarily follows his actions. Beth, in contrast, is there to be looked at (Mulvey). Whether she is bounding across the Outback in little more than a bikini or crying out, naked, to Yorick in his dream, Beth serves as the story's main source of "cheesecake." The book fetishizes her, making her function as a pretty bit of comic art and as a goal to drive the plot.

Beth is not the only character subject to "feminizing" norms of comic book art. All of the women--even the least obviously female character, Agent 355--have colored lips; none of the male characters do. It is unlikely that the lip coloring is meant to represent how the scenes in the story "really" look; in a post-apocalyptic, maleless society, who would have time for lipstick? Rather, red or pink lips work as a visual code in comic books that signifies that the character is female. The comic medium is print-based; unlike radio or television, it cannot rely on vocal differences, for example, to differentiate between men and women. Thus, the nature of the medium requires that visual gender differences be exaggerated and codes like lip coloring be used (McLuhan).

These codes, while serving a pragmatic purpose, entrench traditional conceptions of gender difference.

Not all of the gendered codes in play in *Y: The Last Man* are unique to the comic form, however. In the history of painting, according to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “[t]he implication of a male gaze was often depicted literally...with a woman whose body is turned toward the (presumably male) viewer, but whose head is turned” (Sturken and Cartwright 81). The audience for comic art is predominantly male and, indeed, this code of female representation is repeated in the “paintings” between chapters. On page 36, we see the garbage truck supermodel posed with her hip jutting to the left, her gaze off to the right, and her nipples poking toward the gaze of the observer--a stereotypical, male-oriented pose. That image contrasts with the next chapter’s “painting” of Yorick on page 59. Yorick, as a male, is posed differently. He is active, not passive, captured in the middle of an acrobatic leap with a rippling American flag in the background. Like the model, his gaze also looks to the side, but his body does not face the viewer and thus avoids objectification.

Ironically, the other “painting” of Yorick (on page 105) provides a model of extreme male objectification through the gaze. Yorick’s face is covered by a gas mask, leaving the viewer’s eyes on his naked, immobilized body. However, even this representation solidifies norms of gendered representation. This “painting” strikes the reader as creepy and foreboding, especially in the context of Yorick’s nightmare on the following pages. The mouth from above appears as if it is about to devour Yorick, and the high contrast between lights and darks on Yorick’s body imply a sense of unreal intensity. The Aborigine drawings and Outback imagery also give the “painting” a surreal

overtone. The message is clear: it is not “natural” for the man to be fixed in front of the viewer. Objectification is only “natural” in representations of women.

The ideology behind *Y: The Last Man* is clearly progressive and gender-deconstructing. Yet the traditional, gendered norms of comic book art partially subvert the content’s message. Does this mean that the traditional comic form should be abandoned altogether, per Mulvey’s prescription for mainstream film? The truth seems more complicated. The book demonstrates that even within a traditionalist medium, oppositional ideologies can still be communicated, at least in part. Furthermore, as comics move away from the superhero formula (where everything was exaggerated, including gender differences) towards a variety of more reality-based narratives, the artistic norms evolve. Already, few contemporary graphic novels feature the grossly muscled heros and 36-24-36 damsels found in older comic books. There is no reason to believe that further evolution is impossible within the mainstream.

## Works Cited

- McLuhen, Marshall. "The Medium Is the Message." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet, 1964.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Vaughan, Brian and Pia Guerra. *Y: The Last Man Vol. 1*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.