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CONTENTS

KISS WITH A FIST

The Gendered Power Struggle of the Joker and Harley Quinn

TOSHA TAYLOR

"It is to laugh, huh, Mistah J?"

With this strange phrase, Harley Quinn entered the Batman universe in the twenty-second episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*, "Joker's Favor."[1] The Joker did not answer her question, but he didn't need to; Harley's first appearance was enough to inspire fans' fervor, and she quickly became a fan favorite, particularly among female viewers. Her wild popularity aided her transition from DC's animated universe to the DC comics universe in 1999, a feat at which very few characters (among them Renee Montoya and Mercy Graves) have been successful.[2] She has subsequently appeared in several titles, including her own solo series from 2001–2003, the short-lived *Gotham City Sirens* (2009–2012), and a new solo series beginning in November 2013, as well as the highly successful video games *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) and *Batman: Arkham City* (2011). In addition, she is a frequent choice of cosplayers of all ages, due to both her exuberant personality and traditionally *un*revealing costume.[3] But despite Harley's independent success, it is her relationship with the Joker for which she is most known. Indeed, while the Joker seems perfectly capable of existing as a character without his henchwench, Harley has not yet gained such autonomy. Her relationship with the Joker remains a motif in comics in which Harley appears, even when the story does not feature an appearance by the Joker himself. Her solo stories often return to the subject of her association with the Joker, featuring flashbacks of their past exploits, present-day conflicts, or simply centering on Harley as she laments his absence. In any given story in which Harley appears alone, it is an understood imperative that the Joker exists and has been involved with her, yet no such imperative governs Joker-centric stories. Harley's dependence on the Joker and the Joker's seeming *in*dependence becomes problematic even

outside the narrative, however, for the characteristically abusive nature of their relationship.

Violence against women is not a new phenomenon in comics. Even Batman, despite adhering to a strict moral code, has hit women for merely distracting him. While Batman's occasional assaults on women are, for the most part, a thing of the past, the relationship between the Joker and Harley has drawn much criticism from fans for its persistent and dramatic depiction of domestic abuse. In keeping with their carnivalesque criminal personas, the Joker and Harley imbue instances of abuse with theatricality, which, on one hand, may serve to lighten their violence by assuring the reader that it's "only a joke," while on the other hand adding a layer of grotesquerie absent in violence enacted by any other character. With acts ranging from emotional coercion to murder attempts, the violence between Gotham's most famous clowns often crosses the line from funny to disturbing, prompting some writers to separate the couple—and yet the characters seem doomed to repeat their morbid cycle of unrequited love and physical abuse.

Though we cannot justify the clown couple's criminal violence or the Joker's habitual abuse of his partner, we can seek to explain it through application of Foucault's exploration of subjecthood and Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity. The relationship between the Joker and Harley, per Foucault's and Butler's respective arguments, becomes a representation of the cyclical nature of gendered power struggles in which emotional and physical abuse are rooted in a desire for *and* a rejection of the gendered subject. The Joker and Harley, knowingly or not, perform both active and passive roles within their relationship: both retain their subjecthood while acting out in support *or* rejection of their objectification by the gaze of the other. Any instance of seeming independence is merely performative, for both the Joker and Harley depend on each other for maintenance of their perceived autonomy. For the Joker, violence and psychological abuse become the means through which false notions of autonomy are achieved, and his power as male subject derives, once he has become partnered with Harley, from ritualistic performances of male-on-female subjugation.

Foucault (1982) provides two definitions of the *subject*, that which is "subject to someone else by control and dependence" and that which is "tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge."[4] For the Joker, Harley appears to fall into both categories. His control over her is a clear fact of which both characters seem aware, though the Joker would often appear to not consider Harley at all. However, despite his pretenses at ignoring his henchwench and her affections, the Joker actively makes her a subject to his control, ties

her to his identity through positioning himself as the model for her own criminal persona, *and* grounds himself in his own persona through subjugating her and seeing a mirror of himself in her. Butler (1990) warns that, when belonging to a male subject, power is neither innate nor independent:

> His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding. But that process of meaning-constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy.[5]

While he is Gotham's most fearsome villain, the Joker is inherently at constant risk of being deposed, whether by another villain,[6] by Batman, or by his own grisly demise. He must exercise control to assure himself of his own power, and Harley offers a means through which he may witness and judge his own exercise of power. Alluding to Lacan, Butler (1990) identifies the female subject as the symbolic phallus through which the literal phallus is reflected; the male subject, then, "requires this Other to confirm and, hence, to be the Phallus in its 'extended' sense."[7] If Harley represents the Joker's phallic power, her presence is not expendable, as the Joker would appear to believe, but necessary; likewise, to embody her beloved criminal persona, Harley requires the Joker. Butler further explicates phallic juxtaposition with attention paid to relationships based in subjugation, finding a "failed reciprocity" in which the dominant, empowered party comes to depend upon the one who is typically disempowered and subjugated, for the latter serves as a "reflection" of the former's self and agency.[8] Even while subjugating her through ritual abuse, the Joker relies on Harley as a means through which he accomplishes his criminal work and appraises his own demonstrations of power.

The Joker's dependence on Harley for maintenance of illusory power is suggested even in Harley's first appearance. Indeed, his reliance on her is apparent immediately after her first line in her first appearance, for instead of answering her question, the Joker responds with one of his own: "I ask you, Harley, who's given more hours of amusement to the Gotham police force than me?" "No one, Mistah J," she replies, and proceeds, following the Joker's next self-aggrandizing line, to cheer for him.[9] The Joker's other two henchmen, however, fail to so much as notice that the Joker has been speaking. It is only when the Joker flashes them an angry look that they engage in the scene, but we should note that they don't respond to the Joker, but rather to Harley, wordlessly mirroring her enthusiasm and joining in her applause. Later in the episode, the Joker relies on Harley to set the stage for his climactic

and potentially deadly prank. Not only does she push the giant cake in which the Joker is hiding into the ballroom where a dinner to honor Commissioner Gordon is being held, she also detonates the gas-filled candles that paralyze the partygoers. As the gas is released, she provides a protective mask for the downtrodden Charlie Collins so that he, as another part of the Joker's prank, will be able to struggle (but not to escape) as his own death nears. Once the Joker has emerged from the cake, Harley is the only person capable of cheering for him, and it is she, not the Joker, who makes a crack about the "audience's" inability to respond. Finally in the scene, it is Harley, not the Joker, who attaches the bomb to the paralyzed Commissioner Gordon. Once Batman has disposed of Harley by handcuffing her to a pipe, the Joker at last meets the Dark Knight, from whom he spends most of the scene hiding. At the episode's end, the Joker is bested by Charlie Collins, who threatens to kill him in an alleyway, thus robbing him of the glory of being defeated by Batman. Emasculated, the Joker cries out for Batman's help, and then cowers behind the hero's cape. In retrospect, the Joker himself accomplishes next to nothing in the episode, depending on Harley to act as his cheerleader, stagehand, and enactor of his plans. Without her help, he quickly becomes powerless.

Readers of Batman comics realized Harley's power as a character when she entered the DCU proper as part of the epic *No Man's Land* storyline, in a one-shot written by her original creator Paul Dini, *Batman: Harley Quinn* (1999). The Joker, too, becomes aware of just what an effect his henchwench inadvertently had, and, threatened by her existence, responds to her moment of power the only way he can—by trying to kill her. In a surprising moment for his character, the Joker tells Harley the reason he must kill her is his own failure to remain a bachelor around her:

> I've felt some changes coming over me since you entered my life. I've been reminded of what it's like to be part of a couple, to care for someone who cares for me. It's the first time in recent memory I've had those feelings . . . and I hate having those feelings! They're upsetting, confusing, and worse, distracting me from getting my share of Gotham now that the gettin's good![10]

Here, the Joker makes three admissions: 1) that he does, in fact, care for Harley, 2) that their relationship is a romantic one (it is doubtful he would refer to their pairing as a "couple" if he meant only platonic friendship), and 3) that his feelings for her prevent him from fulfilling the role he normally occupies as the psychotic scourge of Gotham. Just as Batman sometimes finds it hard to balance his relationships with Catwoman and, prior to her return to

unambiguous villainy, Talia al Ghul, with his role as the self-appointed savior of the city, the Joker finds that he cannot function as Gotham's most fearsome villain if he gives in to his unexpected desire for a romantic partnership with Harley.

Butler's 1990 preface to *Gender Trouble* offers insight to the Joker's violent rejection of a relationship with Harley: "For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position."[11] If the Joker is positioned as Batman's exact opposite, a human but nonetheless extremely powerful villain who can never be permanently bested, then the arrival of Harley Quinn as a romantic figure in his life essentially heralds a loss in his perceived power. If the Joker can become the *object* of the female gaze, he must step down somewhat from his heterosexual male *subjecthood*. He, who normally objectifies others through his violence and deadly pranks, finds himself objectified. The female gaze emasculates him, and his body becomes the site of anxiety about the nature of masculine power. His response, as a homicidal psychopath, is to seek to destroy Harley's gaze, thereby reasserting his own place as an empowered male subject.

The clown couple's violent power struggle is perhaps best exemplified in Harley's first origin story, "Mad Love," which won the Eisner Award for Best Single Story in 1994 (originally published as *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love*, adapted into an episode of the same name for the final season of *Batman: The Animated Series*, and collected into *Batman: Mad Love and Other Stories* (for this discussion, I will be referring to its most recent publication). Disappointed when Batman insults an element—for which Harley was responsible—of his most recent plan to kill Commissioner Gordon, the Joker ignores Harley's attempt to seduce him and instead berates her, squirts acid from his boutonniere at her, and, finally, literally kicks her out of their home.[12] Rather than realizing that the Joker is no good for her, Harley vows to win back his affection by killing Batman herself, using an old plan the Joker has discarded. Correcting a mistake in the Joker's plan, Harley succeeds in abducting and disabling Batman, but succumbs to the Dark Knight's manipulation of her feelings for the Joker and calls her mentor to tell him what she's done. Enraged, the Joker imagines not being robbed of the glory of killing Batman himself but emasculating comments from other villains. "There goes the Joker," he imagines the Penguin saying, "the guy whose girlfriend killed Batman!"[13] The Riddler further insults him: "Oh yeah, that's what's-his-name . . . you know . . . Mr. Harley Quinn!"[14] When he arrives at the scene, the Joker ignores Batman and

immediately attacks Harley, hitting her so hard with a phallic comedy prop that she falls through a window, plummeting several stories to the street below (p. 60–61). Renee Montoya finds her lying among the garbage in a dark pool of blood; Harley's lines disturbingly mirror the self-blame of domestic abuse victims: "My fault . . ." she tells Montoya, "I didn't get the joke."[15] The final blow, Batman later tells the Joker, is that Harley almost succeeded in killing him where the Joker has consistently failed.[16] The story's conclusion returns to Harley's point of view as she, covered in bandages and casts, is brought back to her cell at Arkham Asylum. Dr. Leland asks her a question meant to remind her of the Joker's abusive nature: "So, tell me, Harley—how did it feel to be so dependent on a man, that you'd give up everything for him, gaining nothing in return?"[17] Injured and dejected, Harley starts to answer, "It felt like . . ."—but then, seeing a single rose the Joker has sent her, her love-dazed face breaks into a smile and she finishes with an unexpected response. ". . . it felt like a kiss . . . !" she says.[18] In sending the rose and a card with a noncommittal message ("Feel better soon. —J."), the Joker has, at least unconsciously, returned to needing Harley as a guarantor of his villainous power, and has sought to ensure her eventual return to him.

That the language characters use in the story is similar to that of real-life abuse victims and perpetrators is no coincidence, nor should we overlook its gendered meanings, in which the male perpetrator assumes dominance through emotional and physical subjugation of the female object, who, in turn, accepts the abuse as her fault and, out of her own affection for him, forgives her abuser at the slightest sign of repentance (here, undoubtedly feigned). In March 19, 2010, interview with *Rocket Llama*, Paul Dini explicitly characterized the Joker's relationship with Harley as far from egalitarian: "The Joker looks at her as someone to make himself feel better and to have someone to do the work he doesn't want to do. Is it great relationship? No! It's pretty abusive!"[19] Dini's statement not only clears up any doubt that the relationship between the Joker and Harley is, in fact, an abusive one, but also suggests Butler's assessment of gendered power dynamics. If, as Dini says, the Joker uses Harley as means of self-aggrandizement, her presence as his longsuffering partner becomes, once their relationship has begun, absolutely necessary. That she can be perceived as "long-suffering" is also necessary, with particular emphasis on the idea of *suffering*, for Harley must suffer (here meaning *tolerate*) the Joker's psychologically and physically abusive behaviors and must suffer (here, experience pain and injury) at his hands. Furthermore, her suffering must occur as part of a gendered performance of suffering; in the case of "Mad Love," she imagines a loving marriage to the Joker,

complete with children and beachside talks, while his future fantasy exposes his terror of being thought less than a man by his male criminal rivals. As the female victim-object, Harley perceives the rose as a token of the Joker's love, a play on the traditional gendered courtship ritual.

Butler (1990) reminds us that gender performance is not a unique occurrence, but rather, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation."[20] If we look at the Joker's relationship with Harley Quinn as a means of performing gender, we see that the abusive pattern established in "Mad Love" is necessary for its performance. The Joker must accept Harley as his devoted henchwench, must fail to reciprocate her love for him (either through a genuine incapacity for such feelings or through active denial of such a capacity), must enact violence against her, and then must repeat the pattern by accepting her back as a partner in crime when she inevitably returns to him. Likewise, Harley must, despite any moments of independent agency that occur in the interim, return to the Joker and suffer their violent routine once more. The necessity for repetition conforms to Foucault's (1982) explication of a power-based relationship as "a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others" but "acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future."[21] If we apply Butler's and Foucault's call for performed repetition to "Mad Love," we find that each violent or psychologically abusive act is not an independent performance but part of a sequence. The Joker ignores Harley's attempt to seduce him because he views her as a distraction; she steals his rejected plan to kill Batman because he has ignored her; he attacks her because, by stealing, correcting, and implementing his plan, she has bested him at nearly killing Batman. The power of his violence is made clear through a shot of Harley lying in the street in a pool of blood. Taken back to Arkham, Harley might be expected to recognize the Joker's abusive nature and forsake him, but, needing the reflection of himself in his partner, the Joker sends Harley a gift of condolence; she remembers her affection for him; the cycle repeats.

Further evidence of the notion of a gendered power struggle between them is apparent when the typical model of that struggle is disrupted. Disruptions of the model often come in the form of Harley exercising cruelty. Though intended as a lighthearted, cartoonish character, Harley is not without her own capacity for brutality and violence, though she acts upon that capacity with bubbly, sometimes naïve, playfulness. In the past, she has shown

no moral objections to causing potentially fatal injuries to Gotham's heroes and civilians. In a particularly dark depiction of her malicious nature, *Gotham City Sirens* #20–21 depicted Harley using her knowledge of characters' past traumas to manipulate—and ultimately kill—them.[22] Her violence, however, is itself another mirror of the Joker, for it has an origin in the Joker's own actions. Harley's reflection of the Joker often seems a willing performance, rather than an intrinsic identity; it is an aspect of the "Harley Quinn" persona but not its whole. In *Batman: Harley Quinn*, when choosing her costume as part of the persona's creation, Harley rejects a feminized version of the Joker's signature purple suit, calling this getup "too derivative."[23] By rejecting adoption of the Joker's appearance, Harley becomes a more active reflection of her mentor, for, without the purple suit and green wig, she must reflect him in more substantial ways—her actions, language, reactions, and so on. When Harley commits atrocities, she is essentially serving as a mirror of the Joker's power.

But Harley's violence is rarely interpreted, by readers and by other characters, as being as severe or disturbing as that of the Joker. When the Joker ignores her, hits her, pushes her through the window of a high-rise, or attempts to kill her by launching her in a rocket, his violence against her is undeniably troubling. Conversely, when Harley shoots him for ignoring her as she does in *Batman* #663, "The Clown at Midnight," a comedic overtone cancels out the shock of a potentially fatal wounding.[24] We may cite Harley's girlish personality and occasional attempts to lead a crime-free lifestyle as the reason for her exoneration. The most probable reason, however, is the disparity between her actions against the Joker and his against her.

As long as the Joker abuses Harley, Harley's violence may be interpreted as somehow "less" than the Joker's. Once that element is removed, however, Harley becomes a more sinister figure; in *not* abusing his partner, the Joker appears to lose some of his masculine power. Brian Azzarello's graphic novel *Joker* (2008) reimagines the Joker as a noir-esque crime boss with an addiction to pills and a temper far greater than his sense of humor. Harley appears at his side in her signature costume, but Azzarello's Harley lacks a voice, speaking not even a single line through the entire story. Loss of voice does not, however, equal a loss in capacity for violence. At the beginning of the graphic novel, following a reverse striptease in which Harley seductively gets *into* her costume, she appears to assist the Joker in skinning a man alive for spectacle;[25] later, disguised in a gorilla suit (most likely an homage to Marlene Dietrich's reveal in *Blonde Venus* [1932]), she ruthlessly guns down members of a rival gang.[26] The Joker does not act out against Azzarello's Harley; rather,

in a startling moment of vulnerability, he kneels in front her and weeps openly as her body supports him. Though their relationship is not explored in the graphic novel, Azzarello admits his efforts to present a different version of the couple than readers expect: "I think I played Harley against type. . . . Instead of comic relief, she's muscle. The Joker keeps her close because she protects him."[27] Azzarello goes further to state that, by loving the Joker, Harley "takes on all the worst aspects of his personality."[28]

While her adoption of Joker-esque traits is not a novel concept (there has never been any debate about Harley's criminal persona as a living homage to her mentor/partner), Azzarello's Harley enacts violence in a far colder manner than is traditional for the character, and this dramatic change in her personality imbues her with a level of frightening unpredictability normally reserved for the Joker himself. Harley becomes a site of anxiety for the reader, who cannot take amusement in her jokes and misguided love for the Joker, for neither are present. The fact that the Joker does not seem to find a similar site of anxiety in her disquiets the scene in which he cries in front her, for this scene disrupts the dynamic to which the reader is accustomed. The Joker surrenders his autonomous power and accepts a new subjecthood through *subjecting* himself to his lover. Harley, conversely, adopts the role normally fulfilled by the Joker, appearing emotionally removed from the scene as she allows the Joker's prostration but maintains her hold on her cigarette and champagne flute. This scene starkly depicts the relocation of the seat of power as it is transferred from the emasculated Joker to the stoic Harley. The story's narrator, Jonny Frost, cannot look long at the scene and neither can the reader, for our intimate view into the Joker's bedroom is abruptly ended by a location change. Near the end of the novel, the Joker reclaims his masculine power in a sexually charged attack against Jonny, not through lashing out against the man who saw him at his weakest, but through raping Jonny's girlfriend.

Perhaps the greatest disruption of the gendered power struggle between the Joker and Harley, however, occurs in an alternate universe. While never explicitly stated, we can infer that the Joker's emotional manipulation of and physical violence against Harley are based on their respective genders from the fact that the abuse does not occur when the Joker is not male. The Joker received a female treatment in *Elseworlds*, a collection of stories taking place outside mainstream comics continuity that allows writers to explore alternate possibilities and universes for DC characters. In Howard Chaykin and Dan Brereton's *Elseworlds* installment *Batman: Thrillkiller* (1997), a female Joker (Bianca Steeplechase) engages in a seemingly egalitarian relationship

with Harley. Their association is still a romantic one, but the Joker's shift from heterosexual man to lesbian woman removes all traces of domestic abuse. Bianca Steeplechase's femininity is emphasized even when she commits acts of brutal criminality; the second time she appears in the story, she is applying lipstick in a bathroom mirror while Two-Face and other henchmen hold a man's face underwater.[29] Standing in an erotic pose, breasts and rump pushed out, Bianca directs the men's actions from her place at the mirror. Both panels in which she appears on the following page further call attention to her breasts, and for the rest of the story, her cleavage may as well be part of her costume. When she kills Robin, her weapon is literally sexuality, for she forcibly penetrates his mouth with her own poison-laced tongue.[30] Though Harley does not appear until late in the story, Bianca's relationship with her quickly takes the foreground. Instead of insulting or berating her henchwench, the female Joker compliments Harley, her hands noticeably touching her.[31] As they torture Batman, Bianca gives Harley a ring to "cement [their] relationship;"[32] we can contrast this moment to a scene of "The Man Who Killed Batman," the fifty-first episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*, in which the Joker forces Harley to give up the jewelry that would have been the spoils of their latest caper because, realizing Batman might actually be dead, he has become depressed. In addition to physical abuse, *Thrillkiller* removes such acts of emotional abuse and neglect, for the female Joker lacks her male counterpart's need for reflection through subjugation. The story concludes with the Joker dead and Harley alive and on a murderous rampage, clearly able to function as a criminal without her lover and partner.[33]

Ultimately, we may ask if it is necessary for a male Joker to engage in domestic abuse *and* for a female Joker to engage in a lack of it. Discursive notions of gendered sexuality may indicate that this dramatic difference *is*, in fact, born out of necessity. Butler (2009) emphatically argues that, while gender and sexuality are two distinctly different categories, their popularly perceived correlation results in specific needs in their depictions, for "certain forms of sexuality are linked with phantasies about gender, and certain ways of living gender require certain kinds of sexual practices."[34] By this argument, a male Joker engaged in a heterosexual relationship with Harley is inherently expected to enact violence against her, whereas the opposite enactment is expected of the lesbian Joker. Combining this argument with Butler's decree of a lack of agency in gender performance, we find that, as a character, Bianca Steeplechase has little (or even *no*) choice in "performing" an egalitarian, non-abusive relationship with Harley, while the male Joker, in all his incarnations, cannot choose *but* to abuse her.

MORE THAN THE HOOD WAS RED

The Joker as Marxist

RICHARD D. HELDENFELS

In Frank Miller's comic book epic *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), two television commentators debate the return of Batman after a decade's absence. The Joker, confined to an asylum and seeming almost comatose, overhears the TV discussion. His eyes widen, his notorious grin forms, and he stammers, "Batman."[1] It appears their old game is about to resume. But especially significant in the Joker's recognition is the description he hears of his rival, not only as "an aberrant psychotic force" (a phrase that many would apply to the Joker himself) but as someone who is a "morally bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary paranoid—a danger to every citizen of Gotham."[2] This is the Batman the Joker knows best, the one he has long seen in political terms; it is the same Batman whose ideas the Joker has opposed since his debut in the first *Batman* comic in 1940.[3]

The Joker-Batman relationship has long had an element of play, even if that play involved incredible savagery. But their long dance is not simply about that, or even about the broad strokes of a criminal against a crime-stopper. It is about a far deeper struggle, with Batman a representative of the ruling class being repeatedly confronted by a Joker who wants to destroy the class system. In that context, it will take more than the mere death of one or the other to end the warfare of which they are part. Batman could be killed or unmasked, and the forces he represents would remain in power. If the Joker dies, the masses remain. So, for the Joker, the long-term goal is not to destroy Batman, but to end the system that Batman protects.

This goes against two of the more traditional interpretations of the Joker; that he is either a madman or an anarchist. The argument for madness is often made, as when writer Brad Meltzer said in the introduction to one tale that the Joker is "easy to understand. He's insane."[4] But that notion is too

glib; Anthony Kolenic observed that the Joker is more frightening because he "taps into something the audience cannot completely write off as psychosis."[5] The case for the Joker as an anarchist seems stronger, since the word is so often applied to him; for example, in the DVD extras for Tim Burton's *Batman*, a DC Comics executive refers to the Joker as an anarchist,[6] and the comic book *Batman: Impostors* says people emulating the Joker are following an "anarchist" leader[7] on their way to "lawless anarchy."[8] However, this, too, is the reduction of a more complex ideology into the sort of simplistic description that might easily fit into a comic's dialogue balloon.

To be sure, some of the Joker's actions fit into the broad idea of anarchy; he is at one with that cause in the negating of state control over people, for instance. But there are two major areas in which Marxism diverges from anarchism. One is that Marxism is keenly focused on the place in society of capital, which Marx considered "not a personal, but . . . a social power";[9] the pointlessness of the pursuit of capital and its underlying power recurs in Joker stories, as shall be detailed. Even more to the point—and key to the misunderstanding of the Joker as an anarchist—is the way anarchists and Marxists view the concentration of power in different ways, that the struggle between communism's Marx and anarchism's Bakunin was "a struggle between the ideas of order and anarchy."[10] Marx, on his side, believed in "organized systems" for power, whereas Bakunin "rejected all authority . . . in favor of individual freedom, total and uncontrolled."[11] And while it is again tempting to see the Joker in the idea of "uncontrolled" power, he has at various times rejected some authority but not his own, reserving the power to guide the masses along his preferred path. Marxism saw the need for "an overwhelming dose of coercion to achieve socialism,"[12] particularly in the middle stage Marx and Engels imagined between the downfall of the ruling class and the abolition of all classes. There is no question that leaders who embraced and then bent Marxism, such as Lenin and Stalin, were keen to rule during that middle stage. DiScala and Mastellone have characterized Lenin as an authoritarian who centralized the Communist Party's structure and opposed anarchism on the way to a "one-party state."[13] Stalin then "combined in himself the single-party system" while being "a leader who violently eliminates all internal opposition."[14] Again and again in such descriptions does the shadow of the Joker fall, as he, too, centralizes the opposition to the established order—in himself—and wipes out anyone, good or bad, who opposes his ideology.

Of course, no single explanation can be applied to the entirety of Batman lore, where the Joker as well as Batman have undergone numerous interpretive and narrative changes. With documents spanning more than seventy