

**Victorian Genres at Play:
Juvenile Fiction and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen***

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Abstract:

This article examines Alan Moore's appropriation and revision of late-Victorian print forms for juveniles in his neo-Victorian comics series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-), illustrated by Kevin O'Neill. In appropriating the material qualities of Victorian penny fiction, Moore reveals a continuity between Victorian print genres and the contemporary comic book, one that brings the form and structure of *The League* to participate in Moore's larger critique of the late nineteenth century. By mimicking genres such as the penny dreadful and boys' story paper, Moore evokes a history of anxiety about children's reading and uses this history as an entry into the broader conflicts that defined the Victorian period. Significantly, Moore's appropriation of Victorian juvenile magazines also places *The League*'s reader within a satiric neo-Victorian role play of childhood, which situates the reader within the series' larger framework of play. This fundamental playfulness supports Moore's complex and, at times, contradictory portrayal of Victorian culture.

Keywords: *Boys' Own Paper*, comics, childhood, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Alan Moore, juvenile literature, moral panics, penny dreadful, play, story papers.

Although he has been a major force in comics since the early 1980s, Alan Moore has begun to receive significant scholarly attention only within the last decade.¹ While series such as *Watchmen* (1986-1987) and *V for Vendetta* (1982-1989) have made him an important subject for the burgeoning field of comics scholarship, Moore has also become a noteworthy figure for neo-Victorian scholars; his three major neo-Victorian works, *From Hell* (1991-1996), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-), and *Lost Girls* (1991, 2006), take advantage of the unique narrative and artistic capacities of comics and graphic novels to offer innovative, multifaceted readings of the late nineteenth century. In different ways, these

comics work to deflate nostalgia for an idealised past and hold the values of the present open to question. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* takes a particularly playful approach to the neo-Victorian by merging Victorian literary characters with American superhero comics, creating a Victorian superhero team in the vein of DC's Justice League of America and Marvel's Avengers.

Although scholars working in both neo-Victorian and comics studies have explored aspects of *The League* ranging from its satire of Victorian nationalism to its take on history and temporality,² critics have yet to address what I see as a central aspect of the series: Moore's evocation of Victorian childhood and juvenile reading, which is to be found in his appropriation of Victorian literary characters, the form of the comics themselves, and the positioning of his adult audience as neo-Victorian child readers. By appropriating the forms and material history of late Victorian juvenile fiction, Moore brings his form to participate in his critique of Victorian morality. Furthermore, by bringing his readers into the space of childhood reading and juvenile play, Moore creates an encounter with the Victorian that is more complex and ambiguous than a simple skewering of the hypocrisies of Victorian culture. Placing *The League's* form, narrative, and readership 'in play' with the Victorian, Moore opens up a multifaceted reading of the period that is at once an unflinching criticism of it and a recognition of its creative power.

Moore introduces the first volume of the series by describing *The League* as an "exciting picture-periodical for boys and girls" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [5]),³ an opening that sardonically alludes to popular associations between contemporary comics and children. Comics have made considerable headway among adult audiences since the 1980s, but headlines along the lines of 'Comics: Not Just for Kids Anymore!' still seem to be the most popular media response to complex, adult-oriented comics and graphic novels;⁴ indeed, comics scholar Corey Creekmur points out that such headlines have been appearing for the last twenty years at least (Creekmur 2004: 284). This refrain underscores the fact that historically and culturally, comics are a genre traditionally linked to children; they are seen as both written for juveniles and as juvenile in themselves, inasmuch as they are assumed to be simple and "subliterary" (Hatfield 2005: 32). One factor in this persistent association between comics and children is that comics have in the past been perceived as a form of simplified reading, or of nonreading.

Throughout *The League*, Moore draws out the continuity between contemporary comics and the literary traditions of Victorian reading (particularly its popular genres of science fiction, imperial romance, and gothic horror), showing a connection between comics and literature that is rarely foregrounded. Early critics of comics viewed comic books and literature as fundamentally opposed forms, with literature (text) privileged over the comic (image). By merging a major archetype of comics, the superhero, with heroes of Victorian popular fiction, Moore suggests that comics and literature are actually linked by their shared origins within print culture. The stereotype that comics are subliterate and, therefore, suitable only for children falls apart when faced with the overwhelming *literariness* of Moore's comics, which, while evident across his body of work, is most prevalent in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

Moore and illustrator Kevin O'Neill began publishing the series in 1999.⁵ The League consists of five 'superheroes', all pulled from late Victorian adventure, gothic, and science fiction novels, hired by the British Empire to preserve king and country in 1898. They include Allan Quatermain, the hero of several of H. Rider Haggard's imperial adventures; Jules Verne's Captain Nemo; Griffin, the title character of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897); Wilhelmina Murray, of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); and, finally, Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Moore's version of the Victorian age is dark, grisly, and brutal, and though he often borrows characters from juvenile fiction, *The League* is unquestionably adult, steeped in exaggerated violence, sexuality, and gore.

Moore invests his version of the late Victorian period with the continuity traditionally found in comics, meaning that, just as all Marvel comics take place within the same universe and are consistent with each other, in *The League*, all literature has taken place in the same world and according to the same timeline. Thus, in addition to the five principal characters, the series includes a seemingly endless supply of peripheral characters, creating what Moore describes as a "literary Sargasso" of "endless, bottomless intricacy" (Moore 2003: 12). While the most obvious facet of the series' intertextuality is Moore's appropriation of literary characters, *The League* is built upon a more subtle set of allusions to be found in its structure, form, visual style, and language. Moore finds inspiration in sources of all kinds, but these features borrow heavily from a

staple of Victorian children's literature: the cheap weekly serial printed on a mass scale for working and middle-class juveniles.

These widely read periodicals were part of the general rise of popular literature for children in the nineteenth century, a period that, in defining the child as distinct from the adult (with, therefore, a distinct set of needs and desires), participated in bringing about the modern conception of childhood. Because Victorian children were viewed both as vulnerable subjects and as powerful "potential [...] instrument[s] of change", the education of children (both at school and at home) became a major concern for adults (Bratton 1981: 13). In his recent book *The World in Play*, Matthew Kaiser suggests that play was central to Victorian conceptions of childhood and children's education. Seen as an important activity enabling children to "learn, adapt, and develop", child's play was further regarded "as an expression of futurity: a preparatory drive to acquire physical, cognitive, and emotional skills that advanced both the organism and the species" (Kaiser 2012: 30). Recreational reading, which by the end of the period was a common pastime for both middle- and working-class juveniles, formed a significant part of the play of children and adolescents. Although the end of the nineteenth century, in particular, saw children's literature move away from the overtly didactic mode of earlier writing for children, late Victorians still viewed literature for the young as formative and as a mode of transmission for moral values; the content of texts for children (and what constituted 'good' or 'bad' reading) became, therefore, a common topic for debate in the press and among parents and educators.

Moore mimics Victorian print genres for children throughout the first two volumes of *The League*, and in doing so evokes this history of Victorian conflict about juvenile reading. Because these debates had to do with what children should be taught and how adult values should be passed on, Victorian anxiety about childhood reveals much about how the Victorians viewed themselves and how they thought about their legacy to the future. Within children's literature – and conflicts about children's literature – we can see a negotiation of Victorian conceptions of class, imperialism, gender, and approaching modernity. Moore's parodic appropriation of Victorian children's print forms thus serves as an entry point into this range of concerns and works as a foundation for *The League's* broader consideration of conflicts that haunted Victorian culture and continue to haunt our own time.

1. Victorian Penny Papers in Adaptation

Throughout *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Moore's allusions to other texts accentuate the criticism of Victorian culture that underpins the series. By placing children's literature within the wider context of Victorian print culture, *The League* highlights the inconsistencies of the Victorians' moral framework and reveals a culture fundamentally at odds with itself. In a significant example from the first volume, Moore's portrayal of Victorian children exposes two incongruous, but coexisting iterations of childhood to be found within Victorian literature.

The scene in question takes place at a "Correctional Academy for Wayward Gentlewomen" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [42]), where the students include a number of characters from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's novels, including Katy Carr of Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872), Rebecca Randall of Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), and Pollyanna, the ever-optimistic protagonist of the *Pollyanna* novels, also known as the Glad Books (1913-1951),⁶ originated by Eleanor H. Porter and continued by four other authors.⁷



Figure 1: Pollyanna and Rosa Coote, from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume 1* © 2000 Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, reprinted with kind permission of the authors.

Their headmistress is Rosa Coote, a character who appears in a number of works of Victorian sadomasochistic erotica in which she recounts her upbringing in a girls' school whose pupils and mistresses are addicted to

flagellation.⁸ The sequence functions as one large joke, as Moore juxtaposes these childhood role models with an object of explicit sexuality, and satirises late Victorian ideals of girlhood. In one panel, Pollyanna seeks comfort from Rosa after being sexually violated by the Invisible Man. After the assault, Pollyanna maintains, “Oh, I’m fine, ma’am, although I’ve been mishandled by a demon, I’m determined to remain optimistic, no matter what” (Moore & O’Neill 2000: [49]). Here the childhood optimism encouraged by works such as the Glad Books, *What Katy Did*, and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* becomes a wilful, ridiculous blindness; parodying this ideal of the child as naturally cheerful in the face of hardship, Moore calls into question the value of seeking to protect children from ‘bad’ reading material in the face of more threatening social ills.

In pairing these characters, Moore portrays two different but concurrent versions of girlhood to be found in late Victorian and early twentieth-century print: optimistic, plucky young heroines of children’s novels, and the sexual objects of fetishised discipline from more illicit reading material. Throughout *The League*, Moore’s allusions thus make the point that Victorian culture is preserved within its literature, and that this literature constitutes a collection of artefacts reflecting a wide and incongruous range of Victorian desires and anxieties. Pollyanna and Rosa serve as the lingering evidence of the seemingly incompatible Victorian drives for the preservation of childhood innocence and for transgressive sexual practice (which in some cases, such as *The Pearl*, actually fetishised ideals of childhood innocence). In juxtaposing characters from children’s novels and erotic magazines, Moore makes the point that Victorian literature is not limited to the canonical triple-decker realist novel. Rather, the whole range of Victorian print culture – spanning novels, magazines, newspapers, and penny fiction – functions as an archive of the Victorians’ competing and often contradictory desires.

Moore’s ‘borrowing’ from Victorian culture extends well beyond the appropriation of plots and characters to include allusions to the visual and material properties of Victorian print forms; crucially, these allusions depend on his manipulation of the comic book as a print genre. In recent years, comics scholarship has begun to theorise comics as a unique form requiring its own interpretive methodology distinct, for instance, from literary and film theory (Hatfield 2005: 33). Moore himself is a strong advocate for comics as an untranslatable, unreproducible medium; he has

said that *Watchmen*, for instance, “was designed to show off the things that comics could do that cinema and literature couldn’t” (qtd. in Wegner 2010: para. 2). In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Moore similarly stretches the boundaries of his medium in order to engage in a form of adaptation that relies upon the unique material, aesthetic, and kinaesthetic qualities of comics.

Comics scholar Charles Hatfield argues that the material aspects and design of a comic are integral to a reader’s interpretation of its meaning. He writes that

many comics make it impossible to distinguish between text per se and secondary aspects such as design and the physical package, because they continually invoke said aspects to influence the reader’s participation in meaning-making. (Hatfield 2005: 58-60)

While every encounter with a narrative is influenced by the form it takes, the material aspects of comics are particularly significant because important elements of these works’ narratives – such as panel layout and colour – are conditioned by material considerations of print. Linda Hutcheon describes the ways people experience different kinds of stories by delineating a few broad modes of engagement and linking them roughly to major forms of media:

the telling mode (a novel) immerses us through imagination in a fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual [...]; the participatory mode (video games) immerses us physically and kinesthetically. (Hutcheon 2006: 22)

Comics have the ability to engage readers across all three of these modes, perhaps most clearly in the ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ that occurs in comics’ text and imagery, but also in the interaction between the reader and the material text.

Moore capitalises on comics’ capacity for multimodal engagement to create an alternative Victorian world in which he appropriates and remakes the material and aesthetic qualities of Victorian print genres,

specifically penny fiction aimed at the young. Moore establishes a connection between the comics and Victorian juvenile magazines in his initial description of *The League* as a “picture periodical” for children, a linking that continues throughout the series in its style and design, as well as paratextual material that includes mock advertisements, games, and editorial asides. In mimicking the style of penny papers, Moore makes clear the material evolutionary links between Victorian popular fiction and the contemporary comic book, and emphasises the ways that contemporary comics inherit a nineteenth-century tradition of cheap serialised fiction. Furthermore, in the Victorian period, children’s literature was a site of debate, as parents, educators, government officials, and even the police struggled to define and then control ‘proper’ reading for young people. Because it was widely accessible, penny fiction often served as the locus for controversy. In his appropriation of these genres, Moore evokes a history of such controversies and, in turn, evokes a history of Victorian anxiety about children.

Although today the best-known examples of Victorian children’s literature tend to be novels, such works would have been out of reach for most Victorian working-class youths, who as a population were surprisingly literate, even before the Elementary Education Act of 1870.⁹ These children’s experiences of print fiction were made up almost entirely of cheap periodicals, ignominiously dubbed ‘penny dreadfuls’. Evolving from the ‘penny bloods’ of the 1830s, penny dreadfuls were inexpensive, sensational weekly serials of the 1860s onwards, published primarily for working class juveniles. Inspired by gothic novels, penny dreadfuls tended toward the lurid and melodramatic, and often chronicled the adventures of highwaymen, famous criminals, and wild adolescent boys. Moore and O’Neill include a sensational prose story at the end of the first volume of *The League*, titled ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’, which aptly mimics the format and styling of the average penny dreadful. The story purports to be part of “*The ‘Boys’ First-Rate Pocket Library’ of Complete Tales*”, a real Victorian penny dreadful that ran from 1887 to 1905. O’Neill copies the colourful covers for which the publication was known and even includes a reference to the Aldine Publishing Company, which published the *Boys’ First-Rate Pocket Library* as well as a number of other juvenile papers. The layout of the accompanying text similarly imitates the standard features of the penny dreadful, which usually contained “eight pages of octavo-sized

text, printed on fairly good straw paper in double columns of eye straining type [...] and embellished with a lurid front-cover wood engraving” (Springhall 1998: 43).

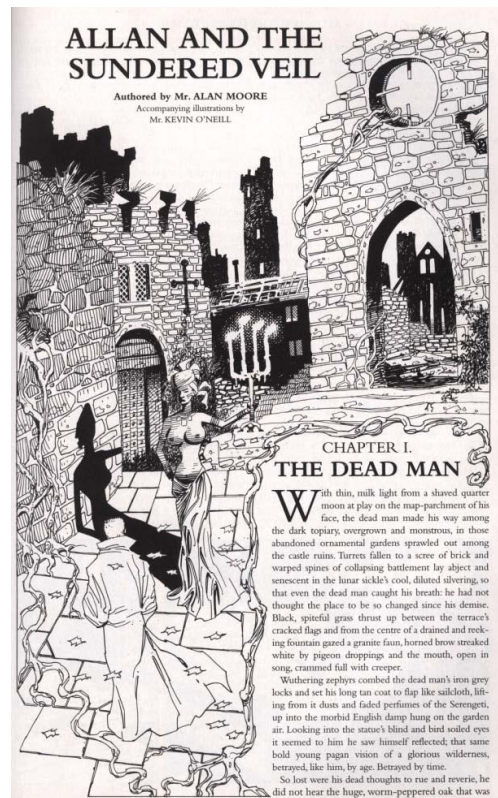


Figure 2: Title page of ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’, from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume 1* © 2000 Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill, reprinted with kind permission of the authors.

‘Penny dreadful’ was a pejorative term, applied across a wide swath of penny fiction by Victorian middle-class writers and educators. While some of these publications truly were ‘dreadful’, most were not as objectionable as the label suggests. The term was indicative of a general middle-class unease with the uses to which working-class literacy on a large scale might be put. In *Empire Boys*, Joseph Bristow describes the penny dreadful as “the first kind of truly mass reading” (Bristow 1991: 11); in London and major manufacturing cities such as Manchester and

Birmingham, publishers could sell as many as thirty to forty thousand copies of an individual serial every week (Springhall 1998: 48). Middle-class anxiety was fuelled by a fear that ‘culture’ might be overtaken by mass reading, and that rather than dictating proper reading material to the working classes, the middle classes might instead be overrun by the “pernicious trash” consumed by working-class readers (B.G. Johns [1887] qtd. in Bristow 1991: 12).¹⁰ At its most extreme, this late Victorian uneasiness with penny dreadfuls was manifested as what John Springhall describes as a “moral panic” (Springhall 1998: 5), in which the English press, police, and members of the government argued that penny dreadfuls glorified criminals and inspired their readers to imitate highwaymen, thieves, and “*Wild Boys*” (Springhall: 1994: 326-327, original emphasis).¹¹

In general, children tend to be at the centre of anxiety about media because they are seen at once as vulnerable audiences and as “media pioneers”, and thus agents of change in themselves (Drotner 1999: 617, see also 613-614). For the late Victorians, children represented both progress and a frightening modernity, a duality reflected in adult panic over their reading practices. Middle-class fears that penny dreadfuls would lead their readers to crime reveal the contradiction in viewing children both as innocents in need of protection and as naturally wild, potentially dangerous delinquents. Of course, these perceptions of the young were contingent on class; fears of ‘dangerous’ children were usually focused on those in the working classes.

Protests against the penny dreadful were often concerned less with the texts’ effects on working-class children than with the dangers they posed to children of the middle class. In a lecture to the Religious Tract Society in 1878, Lord Shaftesbury warned that the penny dreadful “is creeping not only into the houses of the poor, neglected and untaught, but into the largest mansions; penetrating into religious families and astounding careful parents by its frightful uses” (qtd. in Carpenter 1983: 6). Significantly, it was the Religious Tract Society that sought to counter the social effects of the penny dreadful by establishing a different type of children’s periodical in 1879: the highly popular *Boys’ Own Paper*. Presented as a ‘solution’ to the problem of the penny dreadful, the *Boys’ Own Paper* (or *BOP*) was the most widely distributed of a more ‘respectable’ type of literature for juveniles: inexpensive, morally improving, robust, Christian serials for both working- and middle-class boys that could compete with the penny dreadful. Such

works favoured imperial adventures and school stories over the gothic horror tales of the penny dreadful.

It was common in children's serials of both types for an editor or a story's author to explicate the lessons to be found in the paper's pages (though in the case of penny dreadfuls, these claims to the morally improving nature of the work might be rather tenuous). In a number of boys' magazines, the editor took on the role of paternalistic guide and would advise his young audience on matters ranging from personal hygiene to curing a stammer (Drotner 1988: 127). In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Moore reimagines this figure as a fictional editor, Scotty Smiles, who claims to be a "friend and confidant to boys everywhere" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [5]).¹²



Figure 3: Editor's letter, from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Volume 1 © 2000 Alan Moore, and Kevin O'Neill, reprinted with kind permission of the authors.

In a parody of Victorian story papers' editorial letters to readers, Mr. Smiles opens the first issue of *The League* with a salutation:

Greetings, children of vanquished and colonised nations the world o'er. [...]et us bid a special welcome to those poorer children who, in four or five years time, will be gratefully reading these words in a creased and dog-eared copy of this very publication [...] To all such urchins of the future, and to our presumably more well-off, possibly Eton-educated audience of the present day, we wish you many happy fireside hours in perusal of the thrills and chuckles here contained, though let us not forget the many serious, morally instructive points there are within this narrative: firstly, women are always going on and making a fuss. Secondly, the Chinese are brilliant, but evil. Lastly, laudanum, taken in moderation is good for the eyesight and prevents kidney-stones. (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [5])

The humour of this letter comes from Smiles's cheerful emphasis on the wide class and educational disparities that characterised the Victorian juvenile readership and fuelled the debates about children's literature that led to moral outrage about the penny dreadful and the publication of works such as the *Boys' Own Paper*. In a caricature of the 'lessons to be learned' found in Victorian penny fiction, Mr. Smiles's "serious, morally instructive points" for Victorian children work to reveal the inherent incongruity of building a moral and educational framework upon an imperial system rife with misogyny, racism, and opium addiction. The accompanying imagery elaborates upon the text's inherent irony, at first appearing rather cheery, but fracturing upon further perusal. Smiles's letter is embedded within a full-page illustration of a crowded street scene, containing over a dozen figures and coloured in shades of pink, red, and white. With its single illustration made up of complex and competing images, the page as a whole superficially appears to depict a scene of Christmas celebration, but as the eye moves to take in single figures, this perception gives way to a scene of contradictions: the Dickensian Father Christmas at the centre looks cantankerous as he holds his cigar; in a single frame, we see both a rosy-cheeked little girl (about to have her purse snatched) and Poppy the Opium

Eater selling her wares; and gazing upon it all is a jolly, ale-swilling Britannia, unconcerned by the disorder in front of her. In her study of Moore, Annalisa Di Liddo remarks that this page works “parodistically to expose the Victorians’ willing blindness to the paradoxes of their own society” (Di Liddo 2009: 106). I would add that the scene also informs contemporary readers from the start that *The League* will not be an exercise in nostalgia for a kinder, simpler time, but rather a skewering of both Victorian morality and contemporary idealism about the nineteenth century.

Moore’s fictional editor punctuates the events of *The League* with a series of humorous marginal notes that juxtapose *The League*’s graphic violence and tongue-in-cheek warnings to more ‘delicate’ readers. In a gleeful pairing of conservatism and excess, the editor warns, for example, that “[m]others of sensitive or neurasthenic children may wish to examine the contents [of the next issue] before passing it onto their little one” (Moore & O’Neill 2000: [102]), when only a few pages earlier, the reader witnessed Mr. Hyde slaughter dozens of people. This coupling of moralising text and sensational imagery is a running joke throughout the series, enjoyable for its sheer absurdity, but also based on the contradictions of a middle class that felt that children “should be reared in a calm and healthful atmosphere as far aloof as possible from the restless world of their elders” (*St. James Medley* [1863] qtd. in Drotner 1988: 80), while simultaneously accepting child labour, urban poverty, and imperial exploitation. Making fun of Victorian anxiety about child readers, Moore lays open the hypocrisy of a middle class that strives to preserve childhood innocence while ignoring the underlying economic and social causes of juvenile crime.

In appropriating the conventions of late Victorian juvenile magazines, Moore pays particular attention to the role that imperialism played in British children’s fiction and education. In the first two volumes of *The League*, Moore depicts the British Empire as corrupt, faltering, and on the eve of its collapse, a failure represented most clearly by Moore’s portrayal of Allan Quatermain, once “the Empire’s favourite son” and an ideal of English manhood (Moore & O’Neill 2000: [21]), but now physically wasted and addicted to opium. This grim sequel to Haggard’s adventure novels is part of the comics’ broader rejection of the glorification of empire that frequently took place in British fiction for children and adolescents. Late Victorian story paper publishers viewed the imperial adventure as an important site of moral education, especially for boys; in

Manliness and the Boys' Story Paper in Britain, Kelly Boyd describes these stories as “roadmaps to manliness, helping a reader to understand his manly, his British, and sometimes, his imperial role in the world” (Boyd 2003: 48). In a marginal note from *The League, Volume Two*, Moore parodies the story papers' manipulation of patriotism and imperial fervour for commercial gain. As Martians invade England, Scotty Smiles asks,

Can our nation's doughtiest defenders quell the influx of these queerly-behaved foreign devils who show no sign of attempting to adapt to our time-honoured English way of life, with cricket on the green and ladies bicycling to Evensong? Buy our next issue, lads, and let it be your proof of loyal citizenship! (Moore & O'Neill 2003: [78])

Equating patriotism with consumerism, the editor promotes an ideal of serene English life that is as fictional as the invading Martians, a fantasy used to indoctrinate young people into the project of British imperialism. Story papers and adventure novels promoted the manly attributes of stoicism, honesty, bravery, and patriotism, while at the same time purportedly neutralising the dangers of penny dreadfuls by placing violence in an ‘acceptable’ context – that is, outside the ‘civilised’ world of England proper. Imperial heroes of *The Boys' Own Paper* and other story papers were satisfied to subdue “native unrest” with “the glorious English Maxim gun” (Carpenter 1983: 43); the fictional violence that seemed so threatening within the urban English setting of the penny dreadful was no longer so objectionable when directed toward natives of the British colonies. In *The League, Volume Two*, the English-hating Captain Nemo turns this notion of ‘acceptable’ losses on its head as he and Hyde consider sacrificing South London in the face of a Martian invasion: “[Nemo:] As for the population, hopefully they can escape in time. If not, it is hardly a strategic loss. They are only... [Hyde:] Human? [Nemo:] English” (Moore & O'Neill 2003: [95], original ellipses).

This conception of imperial fiction as a form of ‘manly’ education for boys hinges on an assumption that the readers of these works were necessarily juvenile and male. Although the late Victorian and Edwardian eras were, as Kirsten Drotner describes, “the halcyon days of the boys' paper” (Drotner 1988: 123), these years also saw the introduction of a

variety of genres of girls' fiction, including the girls' story paper. Compared to the imperial and school adventures found in boys' story papers and the gothic, hair-raising tales of the penny dreadfuls, the subject matter for the young female audience was decidedly tame; for instance, readers of the first issue of the *Girls' Own Paper* were promised,

This magazine will aim at being to the girls a Counsellor, Playmate, Guardian, Instructor, Companion and Friend. It will help train them in moral and domestic virtues, preparing them for the responsibilities of womanhood for a heavenly home. (qtd. in Carpenter 1983: 44)

Whatever publishers' intentions may have been, however, this gendered separation of readers did not fare well in practice. In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Jonathan Rose demonstrates that 'boys' papers' were quite popular among girl readers, who often preferred the heroic adventures found in boys' fiction over what one young Victorian reader termed the "milk-and-watery sorts of stories" that were to be found in papers intended for girls (Rose 2010: 381).

In *The League*, Moore satirises Victorian assumptions about the 'proper' reading material for boys and girls and the casual misogyny which relegated heroism and adventure to male readers by setting up his own disjunction between his implied and actual audiences, a division that emphasises the highly artificial nature of conventional standards of gender. Through direct address to his readers, as well as his appropriation of the aesthetic, structural, and narrative qualities of Victorian boys' magazines, Moore brings his reader into a farcical neo-Victorian role play, in which he or she is cast in the role of young Victorian boy. Moore's fictional editor makes references here and there to both "boys and girls" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [5]) when addressing his readers, but for the most part he assumes a male audience, referring to his readers as "lads" (Moore & O'Neill 2003: [79]) and to the comic itself as "our new Boys' Picture Monthly" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [55]). He even threatens wayward readers with the 'stain' of the feminine, exhorting, "do not fail to purchase our concluding number, unless, of course, you are a sissy, coward, or girl" (Moore & O'Neill 2003: [126]).

These satirical asides make fun of Victorian assumptions about gender and reading, but they are equally mocking contemporary stereotypes that identify comics as “semi-literate fantasies for adolescent boys” (Creekmur 2004: 289) – a ‘low’ form of reading limited exclusively to males who are juvenile both in age and in temperament. In *The League*, the popular theory that comics (and, particularly, superhero comics) are a male domain is belied by the centrality of Mina Murray as the leader of the group. While the male characters are frequently ruled by their emotions, Mina remains stoic throughout and is clearly the ‘brains’ of the operation. At one point she demands of Quatermain and Captain Nemo, “Are you men, or little boys? You play your little games with your elephant guns and your submersible boats, but one raised voice and you hide like little children!” (Moore & O’Neill 2000: [116-117]). In equating Quatermain and Nemo with juveniles, and their weapons with playthings, Mina suggests that imperial adventure fiction does not, in fact, make men of boys. Rather, it reduces the project of empire to child’s play, and men to overgrown children.¹³

These discrepancies between implied and actual readers (both in Victorian children’s fiction and in Moore’s satire) speak to the uncontrollable nature of a reading audience. In the late Victorian era, however clearly defined a paper’s intended audience may have been, the high volume and low cost of most children’s penny fiction meant that publishers – and even educators and parents – had only tenuous control over what children actually read. For example, although Victorian children’s magazines were designed to teach traditional values of English masculinity and femininity to their young readers, such gendered didacticism falls apart in the face of their actual readerships. Rose suggests, for instance, that boys’ adventure stories had a “liberating influence” on Victorian girls by allowing them to identify with “adventurous male characters” in an era when “truly emancipated [literary] heroines” were scarce (Rose 2010: 379-380). Thus a genre that promoted the ideals of traditional British masculinity among its male readers may have had the opposite effect on an unintended audience, by potentially leading to iconoclasm among girl readers.

A sense of losing or being out of control is key to the development of media-related anxiety. In her work on the subject, Drotner argues that media panics “can be understood as tacit or explicit means of social regulation” (Drotner 1999: 615). Among the Victorians, anxiety about

penny fiction arose from a variety of factors that seemed to resist order and regulation, including increasingly literate masses of working-class people and an explosion of widely available print forms. Seen both as vulnerable readers and as symbols of change, children became the locus of anxiety, a common phenomenon in cases of social unease about media. Comics, too, have their own history of moral panic in the mid-twentieth century, when people assumed – just as Victorians had with penny dreadfuls – that comics might lead to juvenile criminality.¹⁴ Despite important differences in historical circumstance, these cases show that, in a very basic sense, anxieties that people might be corrupted or damaged by the wrong sort of literature are concerned with the general question of how we are affected by the stories we tell. Anxiety about print, whether regarding penny papers or comic books, arises from a recognition of its influence.

In *The League*, Moore skewers Victorian panic about juvenile print culture, in which fear about the effects of children's reading showed little concern with the real experiences of working-class childhood, but his work also supports this conception of literature as profoundly formative. At the end of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: The Black Dossier*, Shakespeare's Prospero speaks to the power of his fellow characters, proclaiming,

the very personality that scrys this epilogue was once unformed, assembled hastily from borrowed scraps, from traits admired in others, from ideals. Did fictional examples not prevail? Holmes' intellect? The might of Hercules? Our virtues, our intoxicating vice: while fashioning thyself, were these not clay? (Moore & O'Neill 2008: [198])

Moore pokes fun at hand-wringing parents who worry about magazines corrupting their children, but his Prospero argues that stories are not only integral to, but also constitutive of, human and cultural identity. Importantly, this "clay" that forms who we are comes not only from the canon or from high art, but from all of the types of stories people consume, from the realist novel to juvenile penny fiction and comic books.

2. *The League's Readers in Play*

In adapting the form of Victorian juvenile penny fiction, Moore brings his form to participate in his sardonic portrayal of Victorian culture. However, Moore's appropriation of the stylistic and material qualities of Victorian children's literature also does the more conceptual work of casting *The League's* adult reader as a neo-Victorian child, a role play that brings the reader into a multimodal, playful engagement with the neo-Victorian. This positioning of the reader as a child occurs through Scotty Smiles's direct addresses to his audience as "lads" and "youthful reader[s]" (Moore & O'Neill 2003: [78, 54]), but also through *The League's* status as an object that evokes earlier print forms for children. By appropriating the form and style of penny dreadfuls and story papers – and thus drawing genealogical connections between Victorian print culture and the contemporary comic – Moore brings the comic itself, as a material object, into the reader's play. Evoking aspects of the look and feel of story papers, the comic functions both as a narrative and, in a sense, a plaything: a neo-Victorian penny paper, for a neo-Victorian child.

The dissonance that this contrivance creates between the explicitly addressed reader (a child) and the series' probable actual reader (an adult) is central both to *The League's* portrayal of the Victorian and to the reader's experience of the comic. A number of contemporary works for children and young adults appropriate or adapt aspects of Victorian literature and culture. For example, in the children's novella *Spring-Heeled Jack* (1989), Philip Pullman, like Moore, finds inspiration within the Victorian tradition of juvenile penny fiction and casts a popular character from mid-Victorian penny dreadfuls as the story's hero.¹⁵ However, these texts and *The League* are starkly different: while most such works use the neo-Victorian as a setting for a child reader, *The League* instead uses children's literature as a setting for a very adult neo-Victorian fantasy. Moore's appropriation of the look, feel, and structure of Victorian penny fiction for young readers is complex and thorough, and it connects the comic book, as a genre historically linked to children, with its Victorian literary ancestors. Simultaneously, these trappings of juvenile literature are at odds with *The League's* contents, which are firmly adult: the series is intensely violent and explicitly sexual, and its intricate intertextuality demands an educated audience. This disconnection between the comics' professed audience and its real one forms the basis for much of *The League's* humour; what makes

Scotty Smiles's description of his readers as "the manly, outwardgoing youngster[s] of today" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [55]) enjoyable is the irony that we are, in reality, not 'youngsters' at all.

Although melodramatic, most penny dreadfuls were not actually as obscene or as violent as their critics claimed; despite panic about their potentially corruptive influence, in reality they "offered little real challenge to dominant middle-class norms" (Springhall 1998: 66). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* comics, conversely, seem designed to fulfil the promise of late-Victorian anxiety about penny dreadfuls by being aggressively bawdy, gory, sexual, and violent. Moore has said that he chose Kevin O'Neill to illustrate *The League* because of the "exaggerated and cartoony quality" of his work (qtd. in Di Liddo 2009: 104), which operates in tandem with Moore's parodic appropriation of some of the more sensational literature of the late Victorian period. The hyperbolic quality of O'Neill's illustration mimics and exceeds the hyperbolic prose of the penny dreadfuls, functioning as a visual rendering of the penny dreadfuls' exaggerated melodrama. Moore and O'Neill use their medium to create moments that, even within the context of *The League's* overblown violence, are likely to be genuinely disturbing for some readers. In *Volume Two*, for instance, Mr. Hyde tortures, rapes, and murders the Invisible Man, who remains invisible throughout the episode. As readers faced with pictures that depict only Hyde's side of the action, we are forced into the unsettling position of having to imagine the Invisible Man into the scene, and, therefore, in a sense, participate in Hyde's actions.

In reading what amounts to a neo-Victorian penny dreadful, Moore's readers inhabit the space, not simply of children, but of the 'bad' children who read penny dreadfuls. We are thus made illicit readers in two ways: as neo-Victorian 'children' reading sensational adult literature and as contemporary adults reading 'childish' superhero comics. In both cases, Moore provides us with the frisson of doing what we are not supposed to do and makes us participate in the border crossing that defines the series: the subversion of genre boundaries that merges 'low' and 'high' culture and grants equal weight to 'classics', penny fiction, and pornography.

Moore further destabilises conventional assumptions about audience and literary hierarchies in the games and puzzles included at the end of individual issues of *The League*. With these games, Moore reproduces a common feature of both Victorian children's serials and twentieth-century

comics, but, in keeping with the rest of the series, he subverts common associations between games and childhood by pairing traditional children's pastimes (such as puzzles, board games, and craft projects) with unlikely subjects. The games find their humour in literary gags, including, for instance, 'Basil Howard's Painting by Numbers', featuring Dorian Gray (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [187]), and in incongruous combinations of children's activities and adult themes. One game, "[r]ecommended for age five and upwards" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: [191]), instructs the reader to help the drug-addled Quatermain hunt for narcotics; again, the game explicitly and satirically figures the reader as a young child.



Figures 4 and 5: 'Basil Howard's Painting by Numbers' and Quatermain's Taduki Game, both from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume 1* © 2000 Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, reprinted with kind permission of the authors.

These literal games, which further Moore's re-imagining of the material features of children's serials, underscore that the series is, in fact, a game in

itself. The world that Moore creates is peopled with hundreds (if not thousands) of literary references, of varying levels of obscurity. These references to Victorian literature create a complex and seemingly endless intertextual web, described by Moore as an “incredibly deep and complex literary swamp” (Moore 2003: 11). *The League*’s allusions to other texts are so numerous and so wide-ranging that they have so far inspired three book-length annotated guides to the series that attempt to identify each reference, panel by panel.¹⁶ These published guides originated in a website created by Jess Nevins, in which he annotated the first series as each issue came out and invited other fans to contribute as well. Thus the ‘game’ of *The League* encourages a reading experience that is both participatory and communal, reminiscent, perhaps, of the way that Victorian penny papers would be passed along from reader to reader, shared, and read aloud.

These elements position *The League*’s reader within a space of play – as a literal player of a game of allusions and as a role-player within a fantasy of neo-Victorian childhood. As play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has argued, ‘play’ is an essentially ambiguous concept that allows for, and to a certain degree is defined by, contradiction.¹⁷ Some forms of play, including games, work in the service of social integration and cohesion, which is evident in *The League*’s community of fans who contribute to solving the series’ many puzzles. Other forms do the opposite by engaging in “interruptions, inversions, and inconsistencies that effectively deflate the orderliness [...] of ‘official’ social structures” (Henricks 2008: 175); this sense of subversion is apparent throughout *The League*, in forms ranging from Moore’s lampooning of Victorian idealism to his disruptions of traditional narrative structures. The excitement of play is rooted in its unfixity; and in *The League*, Moore’s mischievous tone and his game-playing work in conjunction with the structure of the series to keep the reader in a constant state of suspension, wavering between interpretive registers comprised of the comic’s text and imagery, but also of its intertextuality, paratexts, and status as an material object.

Moore describes *The League* as a “literary connect-the-dots puzzle” (qtd. in Di Liddo 2009: 41), which raises the question, ‘What picture do these connections make?’ Given the series’ complexity of narrative and form, it is tempting to try to pin down Moore’s standpoint and to define what his version of the Victorian ‘means’. But the form of the comics themselves rejects this kind of closure and seems to offer contradictory

messages to the reader. For instance, J. B. Jones suggests that *The League* takes a deeply cynical stance on both the Victorian period and the function of narrative within contemporary life, arguing that “[r]ather than insist on the idealised figures of literature [...] *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is more interested in the ruinous effects of narrative” (Jones 2010: 122). Jones’s assertion that *The League* “refuses us any sort of comfortable acceptance of ideals, whether they be located in the past, present, or future” is certainly true (Jones 2010: 122); throughout the series, Moore deflates comforting falsehoods of all kinds – be they Victorian idealism, contemporary nostalgia for a romanticised Victorian age, or our modern conviction that the social injustices and incongruities of the nineteenth century are ones that have been left behind. But even as Moore rejects false ideals (and argues that literature is often the conduit for the lies we tell ourselves), the series’ intertextual game, which pushes readers to search for allusions within the far reaches of the Victorian literary imaginary, insists on the value of narrative, and, particularly, on the creative possibilities of print. The biting cynicism that plays out within *The League*’s narrative is undercut by Moore’s game of allusions, which emphasises the Victorian period as abundantly imaginative and as a site of pleasure and adventure. These seeming contradictions within *The League* are reconciled by the essential playfulness of the series.

Matthew Kaiser argues that, contrary to assumptions that the Victorians were fundamentally serious and therefore ‘anti-play’, the Victorian period was, in fact, a “world in play” (Kaiser 2012: 1). He suggests that not only were Victorians deeply interested in play of all kinds, but that “the concept of play infiltrate[d] the infrastructure of everyday life in the Victorian period”, to the extent that the “network of contradictory and overlapping logics of play constitute[d] the very architecture of *being*” (Kaiser 2012: 5). We can see this concern with play in Victorian anxiety about juvenile recreational reading, which itself is a form of play. In middle-class wrangling about penny dreadfuls and ‘bad’ reading, the concern was not that children should not play, but that children should engage in the right kind of play, the kind that would lead to growth and prosperity for individuals and for the nation.

In its lavish intertextuality and experimentation of form, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* argues that the neo-Victorian is also ‘in play’, and that perhaps the best way to approach Victorian culture from a

contemporary viewpoint is through a framework of play. Moore's take on Victorian culture, which depicts the Victorian as at once deeply problematic and a site of pleasure and creativity, reflects the diversity of the period and, particularly, of its legacy to the present day. Neo-Victorian scholars have noted that 'tracking' the Victorian within contemporary culture poses a challenge because the way that Victorianism survives in the present takes on a huge variety of forms, appearing in places ranging from literature to politics to aesthetics.¹⁸ In *Victoriana*, Cora Kaplan suggests that since the end of the nineteenth century, the Victorian "has become [...] a kind of conceptual nomad, not so much lost as permanently restless and unsettled" (Kaplan 2007: 3). Play, itself essentially unfixed and roaming, offers a mode of approaching the 'nomadic' neo-Victorian in all of its dynamic multiplicity. The fundamentally ludic nature of *The League* allows for a multifaceted engagement with the neo-Victorian, suspended across the various registers of text, image, object, narrative, and game.

Moore's positioning of his readers as children contributes to his satire of the Victorian, but is also key to incorporating them into the play of the comics; significantly, in evoking childhood, Moore evokes the state of being that is most closely associated with play, the period of life when we are the most open to play and to its ambiguities. Children and children's literature thus possess a dual function in *The League*. Moore's appropriation of juvenile penny fiction works as an instrument for breaking apart both the ideals of Victorian culture and contemporary nostalgia for a romanticised past. At the same time, however, by bringing the reader to participate in the diverse play of his neo-Victorian world, Moore's re-imagining of Victorian children's literature functions as the mode through which this rupture is reconciled.

Notes

1. For academic studies of Moore's work, see Klock 2002, Khoury 2003, and Di Liddo 2009.
2. Recent scholarly considerations of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* include Di Liddo 2009, Jones 2010, and Wegner 2010.
3. Because the volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* that I cite in this essay (*Volume One*, *Volume Two*, and *The Black Dossier*) do not include

page numbers, I have paginated these volumes myself. For each volume, the numbering begins on the first page after the cover.

4. There has been much debate about the definition of ‘graphic novel’ versus ‘comics’, and whether these words signify fundamentally different genres. I am not making much of a distinction between the two in this essay because *The League* straddles the line between both – it was originally published serially, in comics form, and then later bound in collected editions that publishers label ‘graphic novels’. For a full discussion of how Moore situates his work within these genres, see Di Liddo 2009: 27-35.
5. Although I do not wish to downplay the significance of Kevin O’Neill’s contribution to the series as its illustrator, throughout this essay I will be referring to Moore as the author of *The League*. In this I follow the approach of Corey Creekmur, who describes Moore’s unusual position in the field of comics: “While many comics fans follow artists rather than writers, the prominence of Moore cannot help but position the artists he has worked with [...] in the secondary role of illustrators of his famously detailed scripts” (Creekmur 2004: 287). Moore and O’Neill have, so far, published three full volumes of the series: *Volume One* (2000), *Volume Two* (2003), and *Volume Three: Century* (2009-2012). A stand-alone work, *The Black Dossier*, was published in 2008. In this essay, I focus primarily on the first two volumes of *The League*, as they are the two most concerned with the Victorian period.
6. Moore has taken some liberties with dates in this scene. The first of the fourteen Glad Books was not published until 1913, fifteen years after *The League, Volume One* takes place.
7. After Porter’s death, Harriet Lummis Smith, Elizabeth Borton, Margaret Piper Chalmers, and Virginia May Moffitt continued the *Pollyanna* series until 1951. Two further sequels were apparently published by Colleen L. Reece in 1995.
8. These works include *The Convent School, or Early Experiences of a Young Flagellant* (William Dugdale, 1876) and *The Pearl*, an erotic magazine published between 1879 and 1880.
9. The rise of industry in the mid-Victorian city led to a major increase in literacy for working-class adults and children. John Springhall estimates that by the 1860s, as much as two-thirds of English working-class youth may have attended school, however briefly (Springhall 1998: 46).
10. On Victorian middle-class concerns about the reading material of the working class, see Bristow 1991: 5-11. See also Patrick Brantlinger’s *The Reading*

Lesson (1998) for an extended study of the anxiety that accompanied the mass reading of popular fiction across the breadth of the nineteenth century.

11. Apprehension about these publications ran so high that in the 1870s, *The Wild Boys of London; or, The Children of the Night*, a penny dreadful which contained sensational stories about a juvenile street gang, was suppressed by the London police (Springhall 1994: 326).
12. Although this insight is not confirmed by Jess Nevins's published annotations of *The League*, I suspect that 'Scotty Smiles' is a reference to Samuel Smiles, author of *Self-Help* (1859). The values of Smiles's influential treatise, which promoted the virtues of industry and perseverance, trickled down into juvenile penny fiction. For instance, excerpts from *Self-Help* could be found in the popular story boys' paper the *Boys of England* (Carpenter 1983: 12).
13. Mina's position within the League figures her as a trailblazer within both the realms of Moore's re-imagined Victorian age and the contemporary superhero comic. There is, therefore, an unfortunate irony in the fact that when the comics were adapted into a mainstream film in 2003, Mina was replaced by the more traditionally 'heroic' Quatermain as leader of the League, and relegated to the role of a supporting player. The belief on the part of the filmmakers that audiences would demand a male lead suggest that gendered assumptions about who reads comic books and watches film adaptations of comic books are alive and well.
14. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, panic about 'crime comics' led to public burnings of comics and congressional hearings in the United States, and, in the mid-1950s, England banned the importation and reprinting of American horror comics (see Springhall 1998: 121-146).
15. Pullman also specifically situates his writing of the novella in a comic book tradition: "Jack was a character from Victorian penny dreadfuls, a sort of early Batman, who dressed up as the Devil to scare evil-doers. [...] I thought it would be a good idea to have a sort of comic-strip look, with speech balloons and lots of action going on in the pictures, which were drawn by David Mostyn. Another thing I had fun with was the chapter-heading quotations. This is the first book in the world to feature a quotation from itself (Chapter 11)" (Pullman 2009: n.p.).
16. These guides include *Heroes & Monsters: The Unofficial Companion to The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *A Blazing World: The Unofficial Companion to the Second League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2004), and *Impossible Territories: An Unofficial Companion to The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2008), all by Nevins.

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17. For an extended study of play's fundamental ambiguity and the diverse critical approaches that have attempted to define it, see Sutton-Smith 1997.
 18. For further discussion of the difficulties of defining neo-Victorianism as a field, see Llewellyn 2008.

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