

## Hanging Out With Halo Jones: 'the first feminist comics heroine'?

Halo Jones, created by Alan Moore and Ian Gibson, was described in *The Observer* as 'possibly the first feminist heroine in comics'. There are obvious problems with this statement; she certainly wasn't the *first* feminist comics character. Equally there are several issues regarding Halo's visual representation (which I hope to address). Unavoidably, all the creators involved in the production of 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' were men, reflecting the disproportionate absence of female creators in the UK comics industry at the time (usually restricted to lettering). Nevertheless, the strip *was* a self-conscious critical engagement with the way women had historically been represented in Anglophone comics. Crucially, it also refracted many of the intense debates within the women's liberation movement in the mid 1970s and early 1980s that led to its fragmentation and transition.

The strip was published in *2000AD* from July 1984 to April 1986 and was arguably contingent on the unorthodox attitude of that title at that time. It told the story of the young everywoman protagonist living in the 50<sup>th</sup> century future, as she tries to escape a series of constricting and repressive situations, symbolised visually by repeated circles and webs. Halo has a compulsion to 'go out', but keeps finding herself in larger prisons – in the first book she tries to escape The Hoop, a huge floating sink estate; in the second she is trapped working as a hostess on a luxury space ship; and in the third she is a soldier embroiled in an interstellar imperialist war.

Both Moore and Gibson cite prevalent sexism in comics as their primary impetus. Moore didn't want to 'write about a pretty scatterbrain who fainted a lot and had trouble keeping her clothes on... [or]...yet another Tough Bitch With A Disintegrator And An Extra "Y" Chromosome'. He had himself written a detailed overview of the historical developments that led to this dichotomy between traditional damsels in distress and hypersexualised postfeminist bad girls, in a three-part article called '*Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies*'. It also highlighted the work of several women creators, notably working in the seventies underground (such as Aline Kominsky Crumb and one

Melinda Gebbie). Such feminist comix had themselves emerged in reaction to misogynist representations in the rest of the underground. They became a space in which such sexist images were satirised and key feminist issues such as abortion, domestic violence, and female masturbation were discussed, dealing with the everyday experiences of ordinary women rather than fantastic characters.

Moore and Gibson similarly wanted to 'take a totally unexceptional character...and just show the sort of triumphs that ordinary people have'. The fact that the strip centred on a woman who 'wasn't anyone special...wasn't that brave, or that clever or that strong', immediately reveals its debt to the women's movement. Key to the second-wave feminist assertion that the 'personal is political', was the practice of **consciousness-raising** pioneered by radical feminists in New York. Consciousness-raising groups allowed participants to discuss their everyday oppression as a means to critically reconstitute the totality of women's social experience, promote collective solidarity and plan action.

This emphasis on subjective experience was reflected in the autobiographical tone of feminist comix, and intimated in 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' through first person narration and **Halo's diaries and letters**. Like feminist cartoonists, Moore and Gibson also directly implicated the reader in the experiences of the diverse female characters, by defying repressive standardised visual modes for representing women. They mobilised the strategies of emotional empathy usually reserved for male characters by frequently showing the female face in **intense close-up**, with a range of expressive emotions portrayed through heavy hatching. Halo was also seen to age as the series progressed, reflecting the dedication to creating realistic female subjects rather than inert symbols. This commitment was helped by the fact that, as in feminist comix, all the central characters were female, inverting the usual male-to-female ratio. As a result Halo didn't become a lone symbol for her entire sex but retained individual particularity.

However, this very particularity immediately reflects some of the debates that divided the British feminist movement. Halo is not a cipher for a universal female subject but a **specifically working class woman**. By the time the strip was published, the generalising notion of sisterhood had been criticised for its denial of the differences within women's oppression as it intersected with class, race and sexuality. Socialist and radical feminists cautioned against notions of equality that merely saw some women elevated to positions of power, while the deeper institutionalised oppression of capitalism and patriarchy remained unchallenged. This adds Halo's critical divergence from ultra-violent, authoritarian heroines that ultimately reproduce hierarchies of power. The female worlds of the strip are importantly not inverted matriarchal utopias. Instead the depiction of the everyday experience of unemployed women, or women in low-paid and casualised jobs, resonated with interrogation of the interactions of class and gender oppression, and the feminisation of poverty.

The visual portrayal of women in the strip also refracted intense debates about cultural representation, female sexuality, and links to sexual violence. In the fraught environment of the Hoop, sexual tensions run high and therefore **women carry weapons and do not expose bare skin**. The portrayal of the main characters wearing distinctively layered clothing, and taking responsibility for their own protection, highlighted the creator's aims to produce realistic women characters rather than hyper-sexualised pin-ups, that in their most extreme bondage iconography intimated rape fantasies. Indeed, in response to this kind of imagery, Moore wrote 'if I were a female comic character, I think I'd be inclined to dress warm, wear three pullovers at once and never go anywhere without a pair of scissors'. In the **early 1980s**, radical feminists were increasingly asserting a link between pornography, particularly BDSM, and male violence, and several groups attacked sex-shops.

However, while Moore's critique of GGA points to an engagement with such concerns, it is clear that the strip does not entirely escape standardised sexist depictions that objectify the female

body for erotic display. Halo's visual representation changes in the second arc, often shown in various states of **undress** and more coy and submissive poses. It is difficult to ascertain whether the changes were merely part of the different story context or one of the compromises made, on the insistence of editors, in order to get the go-ahead for the second book.

This contrast between the two books is directly addressed when Halo communicates her discomfort with her new uniform to her roommate Toy. Toy herself importantly undermined conventional representation of gender hierarchy by virtue of her **height**. She is also self-assured and sexually assertive, and encourages Halo to pursue the character Mix, she is attracted to. Importantly, Halo is depicted as a sexually active character, and other aspects of female sexuality, such as Toy's bisexuality, are addressed in an unsensationalised fashion. This reflected the attitude of 'sex-positive' feminists for whom the open discussion of female erotic desire could be a liberatory practice. They criticised anti-pornography campaigns for amounting to censorship, which could ultimately be used by the state against women and sexual minorities.

To some extent the strip's straddling of both sides of this debate ultimately negates the power of either position. Moore later self-reflexively acknowledged these problematic contradictions in his section of the '**Tharg's Head Revisited**' parody. In the bottom panel he himself is shown asking Gibson if he is holding the artwork to the unrealised Book Four, to which the artist replies 'No! This is Page Three', referring to the topless photographs of glamour models in *The Sun*. However, while they may have failed to escape sexist paradigms entirely, an important reminder of just how far they did is evident if you compare their work to the **covers** produced for the American reprinting of the series.

The second book did also attempt to deal with the key radical feminist issues of rape when Halo is attacked by the robot dog **Toby**. These episodes address the brutality of male sexual violence

in a way that doesn't make the female character helpless or imply that she is actually a willing victim. She fights back and is ultimately helped by her roommates Toy and Glyph. This also highlights an implicit critique of the family: Halo is not part of a traditional nuclear family but alternative kinship structures of female mutual support. The demotion of male characters to incidental roles in some ways echoes a radical feminist separatism. However, idealised conceptualisations of sisterhood are undermined with the character of **Glyph**, who has artificially changed sex so many times it is genderless. As a result, it has become completely desocialised and is ignored by Halo and Toy. The reader however can always see Glyph, distancing them in a way that allows a critical awareness of how the characters' interactions are so contingent on the performance of gender roles. Glyph's very name emphasises that it in fact merely a pictograph, and so are the other characters we so easily ascribe a referent of male or female. Thus Glyph not only stands as a critique of the social construction of gender but a self-reflexive commentary on its cultural presentation and the problem of escaping a highly gendered semiotics.

The third book continued to engage with this critique of biological determinism, reflecting contemporary feminist debate. Where equal rights feminists were accused of exhorting women to emulate undesirable patriarchal behaviour in their critique of femininity, others were accused of celebrating alternative 'feminine' values in an essentialist way. Such idealisations of women often focused on notions that they were inherently nurturing, empathetic and peaceable. This idea that women were naturally pacifist became central to discourse around the women-only peace camp at **Greenham Common**. The arguments made for necessary connections between feminism and antimilitarism ranged from maternalist ideas that women as mothers suffered foremost from war, to radical feminist stances that linked military aggression to domestic and sexual violence as a purely male preserve. Although there was great support for the camp from the feminist movement, many distrusted its construction of femininity. The readers of *Spare Rib* argued, for example, that the

'symbols of life' that were attached to the fence at the base, were actually the symbols of women's oppression – nappies, recipes and tampons.

The third book engaged in this debate directly, dealing as it did with the common *2000AD* topic of 'future war'. Moore and Gibson intended to transcend conventional depictions of armed combat in a way similar to 'Charley's War', but transferred into a futuristic context in which the horrors would be magnified. Halo gets caught up in an imperialist war waged by Earth in order to gain access to valuable minerals that could relieve the economy's reliance on exporting water. She witnesses racism, abuse of civilians, and is ultimately accessory to horrific war crimes. Importantly, the **majority** of the armed forces, as well as the resistance fighters they face, are female. Moore asserts that the depiction of a conflict in which the majority of both the killers and the killed are women was intended as a means of overcoming the readerships' desensitisation to violence due to its comparative rarity in war comics. What really stands out is the depiction of the increasing brutalisation of the female combatant. This is clearest when Halo leaves the army following Toy's death: unemployed, homeless and traumatised she deliberately disfigures herself, cutting off her hair with a **blunt knife**. After she finds herself nonchalantly pointing a gun at a young girl, she is forced to re-enlist with nowhere else to go. Such a vision of the brutality exacted by and upon women soldiers stands as a refutation of any idea that women are naturally more peaceful than men, squarely placing the responsibility for the horror of warfare at the hands of the military leaders and governments that oversee and require its execution.

Despite certain contradictions, 'The Ballad of Halo Jones' represented an insightful engagement with many of the issues and debates central to contemporary feminist theory and practice, as well as contesting conventional representations of female characters in Anglophone comics. The character of Halo particularly resonated with female readers, who asserted 'she's the best female character ever to emerge from your script robots electrodes'. She went on to become

something of a pop culture icon, inspiring a stage adaptation that debuted at the Edinburgh fringe in 1987, and several bands including Transvision Vamp, whose song 'Hanging Out With Halo Jones' insisted 'we're heading out to independence'. More importantly, the strip intervened in a wider debate about the role of women in comics which took place within fandom in the mid-1980s, and subsequently moved further into the public sphere with features on the subject in the national press. Halo was followed by other significant female characters particularly in alternative and small-press comics, which also featured a greater number of women creators.