Religious scholars argue that the battle between chaos and order has been in existence since before humans were able to conceive of it (Mobley p. 16). Ever since their arrival, humans have carried an obsession with the idea of chaotic beings and events existing in direct conflict with what is considered to be good and structured, and humans have attempted to impose order upon what was before seen as untamable. The battle that religion wages against madness is one of the more prominent examples of order versus chaos, one that can be seen throughout history, and which Grant Morrison explores in his famous comic Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on a Serious Earth. Order is tangibly pitted in an unending challenge to chaos, a type of reason against unreason. Thus, the fight between chaos and order is explored through the opposing forces of religion and madness.

The church’s fight against leprosy in the Middle Ages of Europe laid the groundwork for much of society’s treatment of the mentally ill for centuries. From the High Middle Ages to the Crusades, leprosy rampaged across Europe (Foucault p. 3). To contain the spread of this terrible disease, which was often deadly and thought to be highly contagious, thousands of leprosaria were built to house those who fell ill to the disease (Foucault p. 3). Most of these places designed to hold and sometimes attempt to treat those with leprosy were named after saints, hinting at them being run by a church. This is ironic considering that those who were infected with the disease were almost always denied access into churches (Foucault p. 4, 6). Because even churches would not provide sanctuary to lepers outside of leprosarias, there developed a belief that to leave a leper on one’s own doorstep instead of permitting him entry was to help him on his way to heaven (Foucault p. 7). In his book Madness & Civilization, Foucault says, “Abandonment is his salvation; his exclusion offers him another form of communion.” Ill treatment is therefore not only justified but encouraged by those who hold power in religious institutions.

To the relief of Europe, the epidemic of leprosy came to a halt and all but disappeared by the end of the Middle Ages (Foucault p. 3). Unfortunately, the mentally ill became Europe’s next scapegoat to exclude from society. As a result, many ‘madmen,’ those who acted strangely or were thought to be mentally compromised, were taken from their homes and families and put onto cargo ships. (Foucault p. 8). These souls were contained indefinitely in a place that was considered to be spiritually purifying: the sea. Eventually, some landed on shore and disembarked on foreign soil. Some were allowed to stay in cities there and were housed and provided for. However, they were provided no treatment for their mental issues and were once again not allowed into churches (Foucault p. 10). Therefore, religion seeks to maintain order in its sacred places by prohibiting those experiencing the chaos of mental illness from entering their sacred places. Again, order is maintained through banishment and exclusion.

Chaos has a deep root in religion itself, namely in Christianity. In the Christian Bible, the books of Genesis, Psalms, Job, and Isaiah all make reference to creation and its forming by God (Mobley p. 17, 23). Highlighted in all of these books except Genesis, is the idea that to create the world as we know it, God had to subdue a monster (Mobley p. 16). This monster is referred to in different ways throughout these books, as Leviathan, Rahab, and “the dragon” (Mobley p. 16, 17). The texts refer to God having battled this monster, the personification of chaos. The fact that the world exists as it does means that God won (Mobley p. 20).

Mobley finds God to be a direct personification of order. Thus, he implies that the biblical story of creation is not about God’s creation of everything out of a void of nothing, but rather a structuring of the chaos that existed before (Mobley p. 20). Mobley points out that many times, this chaos monster is said to exist in “cosmic waters.” The taming of these waters is then then means through which God was able to control the monster of chaos (Mobley p. 21). It is also said to be where the defeated monster is then cast to (Mobley p.21) The idea of water as a medium between what is ordered and what is chaotic could possibly be the stem of the exile of madmen to sea in the end of the Middle Ages.
As the chaos monster is exiled to the water and subdued by God in this way, the separation and exile of madmen is justified by those who believe in order through their belief in this version of creation.

Grant Morrison delves into the idea that order in conflict with chaos is almost synonymous with the fight between religion and madness in his work. He does so specifically in his graphic novelArkham Asylum: A Serious House on a Serious Earthby exposing chaos inside of the asylum, while contrasting the overwhelming madness with several biblical references. The subtitle of the book itself comes from a poem from Philip Larkin entitled “Church Going” (Callahan p.38). This poem itself describes the void of a church left abandoned (Callahan p. 38). Arkham Asylum is far from a church and nowhere near abandonment; on the contrary, it houses many of the criminally insane inside of the city of Gotham (Callahan p. 38). It is a place where those who have committed heinous crimes against humanity, and have been convicted mad because of it, are trapped and “treated.” In this way, the city of Gotham, which values order, makes an attempt to contain the chaos of its criminals by placing them within the restrictive grounds of an asylum.

Morrison follows Batman's journey through the expansive halls of Arkham Asylum. Some allusions to religious imagery are present in subtle ways throughout the book and through many characters. Many of these characters symbolize pieces of Christianity, such as rebirth, fertility, and Jesus Christ (Callahan p. 44-48). One form of this in particular is a panel that depicts the inside of the asylum. In the foreground is the back of the Joker and as a focus of the frame a person hangs from the ceiling (Morrison p.30). His stance mimics that of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ of the Christian religion as his arms are outstretched and his legs crossed to form a figure four. The part of this imagery that makes it twisted, however, is that the suspended figure is hung upside down, as a faceless chandelier (Morrison p.30). This upside-down form is also the same figure that appears on “The Hanged Man” Tarot card; a form of psychic reading that Morrison references heavily (Callahad p. 54). The meaning of this card is fertility, another allusion to Christ of the Christian faith, as Jesus was said to be the ultimate representation of a fertility god sacrificing himself for rebirth (Callahad p.54, 51). The image of the hanging man in this case is disturbing in that it takes madness and religion at this point and unites them in one panel as one body. In the rest of this panel, there are several other distorted figures yelling, bleeding, screaming incoherent phrases, and taking part in actions indistinguishable to the reader. As it is clear that the hanging man is intentionally set in a highly visible way in the panel, it could be Morrison's strategy to make the reader uncomfortable with the Christian themes in the image. In this way, Morrison highlights that religion is out of place in chaos, as chaos is synonymous with madness and religion with order. It is the chaos of this scene- the combination of religious motifs and pure madness- that gives Batman his first insight into what the rest of his time inside of the asylum will be like.

While he explores the rest of Arkham Asylum, Batman seems to lose his sense of reason and serious attitude as he runs into characters who have been sentenced to the asylum and have lost all traces of sanity. Most notably, Batman is forced to battle Killer Croc, a reptilian creature used by Morrison to symbolize the Chaos Monster of Christianity (Callahan p. 58). At one point during their fight, Killer Croc seems to defeat Batman by throwing him from a window (Callahan p. 58). However, as he falls, Batman sees a statue of St. Michael, a Christian figure said to have slain a serpent of chaos (Callahan p.52). In an allusion to the way that St. Michael defeated the monster said to represent primal chaos, Batman takes the spear from the statue and uses it to slay Killer Croc, thus defeating chaos (Callahan p. 58). Morrison uses this battle to show the relationship between religion and madness in direct connection to the fight of chaos and order. This is evident as after this fight, order having conquered chaos, Batman's mind seems to be cleared. He notices his senses to be rediscovered, and he is back to rational and able character that he is known to be (Morrison).

It is no question that the battle between chaos and order has existed through the ages of humanity. Through the biblical age, the Middle Ages, and modern day there has been acknowledgement of the opposition that chaos and order stand to create. From the slaying of the chaos monster as depicted in the Hebrew bible, to banishment of the mentally ill from churches during the Middle Ages, to the popular graphic novel medium, religion versus madness has been a prevalent issue. These two linked battles speak to the extent to which the adversity between the opposing forces is acknowledged and recognized on a global scale, withstand the test of time. That is because in the end, they can be reduced to be understood as common equals and synonyms to each other.

Bibliography


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Grant Morrison, earlier this year, by Laura Sneddon. Over the last few weeks, my good friend Pádraig Ó Méalóid has been writing a series of articles about Alan Moore and Superfolks, which became an edgeways look at the long running friction between Moore and fellow writer, Grant Morrison. While Moore has previously spoken out about his thoughts on Morrison in various interviews, Morrison has generally kept quiet on the issue. As to my own credentials, I have interviewed both men more than once in the past, and enjoy many of the works of both, but have had very different experiences with the two men on both a personal and professional level. I freely admit then my bias towards Morrison, as Pádraig does for Moore. But enough of me, let’s get on with the remix. Grant Morrison Batman Trade Paperback Reading Order. Pre-Reading – The Black Casebook. The Black Casebook is recommended reading and not officially a part of the Grant Morrison run, however he has clearly used these collections as inspiration as he has provided the forward to the TPB and once you’ve read this and RIP then you will see the connection in front of your very eyes. Grant Morrison’s crazy tales can be steeped in context and The Black Casebook will enable you to understand it all a little bit more. Batman & Son not only serves as the start of Grant Morrisons streak but also as one of the most significant storylines in Batman’s entire graphic history. Not to be missed. What’s included? The first thing the comics writer Grant Morrison did when he arrived at the podium to address the Disinfocon convention in 2000 was to unleash a bloodcurdling 10-second scream. “Okay, I’m pissed,” he admitted to the audience at the bash for the anti-establishment publisher. Morrison, who is in the DC comics stable, certainly plays up to his own myth with his shaved head, shades and trenchcoat. But he’s thoughtful and well read, too. Its themes are: order v chaos (the Invisibles are fighting the Archons of the Outer Church, a race of inter-dimensional beetles with obsessive-compulsive disorder), time and timelessness, occult magic, and psychedelic or hallucinatory experience. But, rather than being sombre or preachy, it’s rollicking good fun.