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Candy and Drugs for Dinner: *Rat Queens*, Genre, and Our Aesthetic Categories

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter links the seemingly disparate but deeply interconnected discourses and practices of contemporary media production, genre, aesthetics, and comics. It offers these arguments through a case study of the popular fantasy comic book *Rat Queens* and in the process demonstrates the critical utility to comics studies of reading genre, aesthetics, and industry together. The chapter reads *Rat Queens* through Sianne Ngai's conception of the zany, cute, and interesting, showing how each of these categories is part of the aesthetic logic of the series, while also showing how each performs or critiques the series' (superficial) investment in gender politics and the fantasy genre.

Keywords: comic books, fantasy, aesthetics, genre, *Rat Queens*, zany, cute, interesting, gender

“Why is it that wherever there's a Rat Queen, someone gets assaulted or a building gets destroyed?”

—Sawyer, captain of the Palisade Guard (*RQV1*)¹

The comic-book series *Rat Queens*, published by Image Comics on a semiregular schedule since 2013 and, as of early 2019, consisting of more than thirty issues and one-shot specials, opens like a typical *Dungeons & Dragons*-style (*D&D*) fantasy adventure. A town seemingly set in the Middle Ages, populated by humans, elves, dwarves, and other fantasy beings, has a problem. It's an idyllic town with a bland name, Palisade, where everything runs smoothly and the citizens are happy, but all of this has been disrupted by some intervening, malevolent force. In the average *D&D* game or fantasy novel, this is the problem the adventurers work together to solve. *Rat Queens* writer Kurtis J. Wiebe bucks this fantasy trope immediately and in doing so sets the tone for the whole series. In Wiebe's take on the *D&D* fantasy adventure, the titular *Rat Queens*—the elf necromancer Hannah, the dwarf warrior (and princess) Violet, the smidgen (a hobbit or halfling-like people) Betty, and the atheist human cleric Dee (the only person of color in the series, dressed as a

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cliché voodoo practitioner), with the transgender orc warrior Braga joining in later issues—are the town’s problem. They are introduced with a splash page that sets the narrative and aesthetic tone for whole series, a two-page spread of a Palisade street with sprawling, bloodied people everywhere, buildings damaged, poles knocked over, windows broken, signs and banners ripped down. To the left, at a canted angle, stand the triumphant queens, with Violet tired from the fight, Dee aloof, Hannah raring for more, and Betty uninterested in anything but her beer. On display here are the aesthetic principles that guide the series, what Sianne Ngai calls “the commodity aesthetic of cuteness, the discursive aesthetic of the interesting, and the performative aesthetic of zaniness” in her groundbreaking book *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Together, the zany, cute, and interesting “help us get at some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in late capitalist societies today” (Ngai 1), and their presentation in *Rat Queens* is no exception.

Rat Queens is a collage of references and narrative tropes drawing on a century of fantasy. Though not a *D&D* franchise comic, *Rat Queens* is nonetheless saturated with the tabletop role-playing game’s recognizable brand of quest-based fantasy adventure narrative that pits a party of diverse characters, with complementary backgrounds and skill sets, against the odds, typically embroiling the otherwise completely normal adventurers in immense plots to save the local town, city, world, or universe. Created in 1974, *D&D* has largely been (or has at least been understood in popular culture to be) played by adolescent boys and men. In Wiebe’s comic, the main characters are all women, some queer, and all unabashedly sexual, funny, violent, and debaucherous. This led many to hail the comic as a feminist spin on *D&D*, despite the fact that the series was initially created by two men, one of whom later left the series after he was arrested for domestic violence. The narrative and production situation of *Rat Queens* is symptomatic of the comics industry’s simultaneous attempts to tell diverse, socially just stories without courting diverse artistic talent, relying instead on a rotating door of white men (and occasionally women) to tell the stories of much more heterogeneous comic-book storyworlds.

In this chapter, I link the seemingly disparate but deeply interconnected discourses and practices of contemporary media production, genre, aesthetics, and comics. For the purposes of *The Oxford University Press Handbook of Comics Studies*, I offer these arguments through a case study of a popular, if certainly problematic, comic book and in the process demonstrate the critical utility to comics studies of reading genre, aesthetics, and industry together. I read *Rat Queens* through Ngai’s conception of zany, cute, and interesting, showing how each of these categories is part of the aesthetic logics of the series, while also showing how each performs or critiques the series’ (superficial) investment in gender politics and the fantasy genre. Like Henry Jenkins’s contribution to this volume, this chapter offers a case study that gives insight into the broader political and industrial scope of comics and in doing so emphasizes the importance of aesthetics in understanding the relationship between the comics industry, comics themselves as art objects, and their narrative and representational strategies. I suggest ultimately that *Rat Queens*’ aesthetic repertoire of the contemporary is symptomatic of the larger aesthetic cachet of its publisher, Image Comics, and no doubt a major impetus for its success as a pseudo-indie, pseudo-mainstream comic-book company that courts a wacky range of creative talents,

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takes chances on short-lived series with strange premises, and is (supposedly) not beholden to comics publishing and narrative traditions but conforms nonetheless to broader artistic expectations—cultural demands, even—to be zany, cute, and interesting.

Genre and Aesthetics in Comics Criticism

Genre is a definitive category in comics studies. Though few comics scholars engage with genre theory as such, genre nonetheless weighs heavily on the field, where the categories of “mainstream” and “indie,” “art,” or “alternative” comics have been maintained with the same levels of distinction as have “genre fiction” (that is, popular genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, and romance) and “literary fiction” (for the most part a descriptor of supposed literary quality, as well as a product of what Mark McGurl calls the “program era” of university-based writing training) in postwar literature studies. In this way, “indie” and “alternative” comics, especially (auto)biographical comics about real people, places, and events—such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*—have come to be seen as simultaneously nongenre and a genre of their own. On the other hand, mainstream comics published by companies such as DC Comics and Marvel Comics, as well as a host of smaller, “indie” publishers that are nonetheless part of the same comics market and distribution model—such as BOOM! Studios, Dark Horse, Dynamite, IDW, and Image—are more clearly defined by the generic categories of popular fiction and film. Without doubt, the most significant genre in comics studies is the superhero, in no small part because caped crusaders and their offshoots have dominated the mainstream comics market since the 1950s, even though other genres, notably the western, romance, horror, and, to a more limited extent, science fiction and fantasy, have waxed and waned in popularity across the decades. Superheroes have their origins in comics, unlike the other genres, and so are a locus of some pride for comics scholars and have also, on account of their adaptation into blockbuster hits beginning in the late 1990s, inspired film scholars to put the genre in perspective. Thus, where genre has found critical purchase in comics studies, it has been in explicit attempts to define the transmedial genre of the superhero, as evidenced in the work of Peter Coogan, Scott Bukatman, and Ramzi Fawaz, the latter two of whom have also considered the superhero genre’s intersection with other genres, as well as the political and aesthetic dimensions of such genre crossings.

Because comics is a hybrid visual medium, aesthetics plays a significant role in comics studies, even if references to aesthetics tend to only use it as a shorthand for the overall look of a comic. Like genre, aesthetics clearly plays a significant role in the history of comics and is often linked with shifts in the political and artistic terrain of comics genres that mark tentative boundaries of periodization, so that it is possible, for example in superhero comics, to notice an aesthetic shift alongside a turn toward more explicitly violent, nihilistic, and adult-themed storylines circa 1985 to 1996, which are also symptomatic of interconnected changes in culture (neoliberalism, the Reagan era, the AIDS crisis, heating and thaw of the Cold War), artists (the British invasion, Art Spiegelman, Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld), and industry organization (rise of the direct market, emergence

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of “alternative” and “indie” comics scenes, growing popularity of adult-targeted imprints). Charles Hatfield makes a similar argument about the emergence of alternative comics in the 1970s and 1980s, which developed in part out of the “aesthetic and economic example” of underground comix in the decade before (ix). If underground and alternative comics (and to some extent the more recent development of indie comics) valued self-expression and originality and were for the most part not published serially (as most mainstream comics are), then mainstream comics valued something more like company identity or character visual integrity, so that Marvel and DC, the two most prominent mainstream publishers since the 1960s, developed their own “house” styles and aesthetic languages for certain characters which, although they did not remain static over the years, changed only slowly.

Among those interested in how comics work, that is, in structural and formal questions about how text and image create meaning, aesthetics has been influential, particularly among the art historians in comics studies. Among these are David Kunzle, who recovered the work of Rodolphe Töpffer, likely the first modern practitioner of comics art and also a significant early aesthetic theorist. David Carrier deals with aesthetics in his aptly named *The Aesthetics of Comics*, though he is much more concerned with the analytic philosophical tradition of aesthetics that means, after Ernst Gombrich, “finding out what role the image may play in the household of our mind” (qtd. in Carrier 2) than he is with answering questions about the political economy of aesthetics in comics art. Thierry Groensteen, perhaps the most significant structural theorist of comics, however, makes little use of aesthetics theory in his books on comics narrative and structure, though he makes common reference to aesthetics as that which describes comics’ literary and artistic qualities beyond the narrative and structural dimensions of the art.

Aesthetics in comics studies, simply put, is about the look of comics art and is thus defined by local, discursive, and history-specific concerns. It is in part the look of comics, especially the look of children’s and mainstream comics, that has entangled aesthetics with the question of comics’ cultural status, making aesthetics, if not a common explicit topic for comics scholars, then at least an important and potentially field-legitimizing one. As Christopher Pizzino argues, aesthetics is fundamentally linked with the question of comics’ status as a medium and especially with the status of the genre of comics that creators choose to produce (12). In part by reference to aesthetic traditions within and outside comics and a self-awareness of the aesthetic status of comics as simultaneously mass cultural and art objects, “a comic can express, respond to, or make visible the problem of illegitimacy, as if the text were sentient, and self-reflexively aware of its status” (13). As a medium, Pizzino continues, “comics responds to its status with energetically paradoxical thematic and aesthetic strategies, both acknowledging and exploiting its status to powerful effect” (13). For earlier comics scholars, aesthetic complexity—as recognized by a traditional artistic, and usually modernist or postmodernist, understanding of quality²—was a way to mark comics as “mature” or “adult,” therefore worthy of interpretation. The quintessential example of this scholarship is Roger Sabin’s book on “adult comics,” a category Pizzino parses to mean “possessing aesthetic, moral or political value” (Pizzino 41).

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Unsurprisingly, in their seminal work on the role of symbolic capital in the comics field, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo argue that “the pursuit of pure, disinterested aesthetic goals” in a given comic is often synonymous with its lack of success in the comics market and its inverse popularity among scholars, such that foundational works of comics scholarship relied on comics that only specialists had read (66–72). In this way, comics scholarship has tended to reproduce what Bourdieu called the field of restricted production, and while comics scholarship in recent years has placed less emphasis on selecting comics with “pure, disinterested aesthetic goals,” arguments in favor of bringing this or that author, these or those comics, under the purview of criticism often nonetheless turn on the exceptionality of the art and the storytelling (to be sure, not without reason). This is especially the case with single-author studies or studies of an influential series, for example, Hatfield’s biocritical study of Jack Kirby or Paul Young’s study of Frank Miller’s *Daredevil*. Frederick Luis Aldama, on the other hand, has used aesthetics not to build a new canon of “plausible texts” (Beaty and Woo 5) but to describe the lengths (or not) to which creators go in their attempts to write and draw difference in comics, with specific reference to the production of Latinx superheroes. Aldama’s conception of will to style is an aesthetic and narrative call to integrate readers’ sociohistorical realities with the (re)presentation of those realities in comics and is thus particularly timely in relation to discussing a comic such as *Rat Queens* which was hailed as a feminist intervention in the usually all-male dynamics of comics generally and *D&D* fantasy adventure specifically.

Following in this vein and building on a tradition of studying the sociology and political economy of aesthetics, this chapter focuses on a single series, drawn and inked and colored by multiple artists and written by one writer. But my intent is not to single out *Rat Queens*’ aesthetic exceptionality. In fact, the series is quite uneven across artists and even within individual issues; moreover, it suffered from shoddy, uninventive writing in Volume 4, after Wiebe trashed a previously published issue (#16 of the original print run, which was left out of the trade paperbacks) because he felt unable to wrap up its storyline. But, as I hope to show by pointing to the comic’s use of genre, particularly with reference to fantasy comics and *D&D*, and its expression of certain contemporary aesthetic priorities, especially zaniness and the interesting, the series offers an important symptomatic study of the contemporary comics industry and the political economy of what Beaty and Woo call the “quality popular comic book” (63).

Fantasy and Comics: Contextualizing *Rat Queens*

It would not be a stretch to say that in the United States, fantasy media since the 1960s have been sculpted to the contours of three source texts: Robert E. Howard’s *Conan* stories, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth (including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*), and the tabletop role-playing game *D&D*. Each of these has had numerous instantiations; Tolkien’s original novels, for example, have been adapted to comics multiple times, were made into animated features by Rankin/Bass Productions between 1977 and 1980, and

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later became two trilogies of live-action films directed by Peter Jackson. Howard's *Conan* stories, originally published in pulps in the 1930s and repopularized in the 1960s through heavily edited mass-market paperback reprints (Jerng 129–157), and *D&D*, a game system for generating fantasy stories of all sorts (heavily influenced by Howard and Tolkien), have circulated in comics since the 1970s, though the genre of fantasy comics dates to before the comic book and is at least as old as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* newspaper strip (1905). McCay's comic read more like Victorian fantastica than the mainstream genre fantasy of today, in part because the fiction and film marketing category of fantasy emerged only in the wake of Tolkien's success in the United States in the 1960s, when his books were reissued in mass-market paperback by Ballantine. Hal Foster's pseudo-Arthurian fantasy strip *Prince Valiant* (1937) is a more clearly generic predecessor of the fantasy comics that blossomed in the 1970s in titles such as *Amethyst*, *Princess of Gemworld*, *Cerebus*, *Elfquest*, *Heavy Metal*, *Savage Tales*, *Sword of Sorcery*, and Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian*. Many of these comics, *Conan* included, drew on the amorphous horror-fantasy hybrid genre "the weird," which took its name from the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* where *Conan* stories were originally published, and which is most clearly represented in contemporary media by the resurgence of interest in the writing of H. P. Lovecraft.

As this short account shows, transmedia and adaptation have played a significant role in fantasy comics' history. Indeed, outside of the tabletop role-playing game itself and the 1980s animated television show, *D&D* is also known from its comic-book adaptations in the form of the *Dragonlance*, *Forgotten Realms*, and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* series that DC produced through a license from TSR, then owners of *D&D*, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The *Conan* comics are perhaps the biggest success in fantasy comics adaptation, having been published regularly since the early 1970s by Marvel and later Dark Horse. The character proved so popular in his pulp afterlife in the comics that he was franchised into a blockbuster 1982 film, named after the comic (none of the original Howard story titles bore either Conan's name or the word *barbarian*), and the original draft of the film was even co-scripted by longtime *Conan the Barbarian* comics writer Roy Thomas. It is from this multimediated, transmedia field of fantasy comics that *Rat Queens* emerged, not only to satirize (or, at the very least, to make shallow jokes about) but also to break genre tropes.

Wiebe's *Rat Queens* makes heavy use of the breadth of transmedia fantasy, drawing especially on the *D&D* concept of an adventuring party taking quests to gain gold and fame. In addition, much of the humor in the series draws on readers' knowledge of the fantasy genre broadly. For example, the first trade paperback volume is titled *Sass and Sorcery*, a play on the "sword and sorcery" fantasy subgenre that indexes the gendered attitudes of the main characters, and the fourth trade paperback volume is called *High Fantasies*, a dual play on the subgenre of morally righteous high fantasy and the characters' drug use. Moreover, fantasy mainstays, such as Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins and Conan himself, are referred to throughout the series, the former via repeated references to a smidgen (Wiebe's hobbits) mob boss named Bilford Bogin, whose name is also a curse, and the latter in the

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form of a painting (after Frank Frazetta's style) displayed on the office wall of the merchant Gerrig (*RQV1*).

The series as a whole is an intertextual circus of loosely deployed fantasy, weird, and other generic (including cyberpunk) signifiers all fit to the form of the *D&D* adventure and the raucous all-female buddy comedy. Not for nothing, Wiebe describes his comic as "Lord of the Rings meets Bridesmaids," in reference to the trend-setting 2011 female-led movie comedy (Esposito), and the back cover of *RQV1* describes it as "a violent, monster killing epic that is like Buffy meets Tank Girl in a Lord of the Rings world on crack!" The first volume establishes the series' bawdy tone and insensitivity to genre tropes but nonetheless turns on the basic fantasy role-playing game plot in which adventurers take quests for gold. The first issues of *Rat Queens* questions this premise, asks why adventurers adventure, and considers what a world of adventurers, each vying for glory and gold, would really look like. Palisade is overrun with adventurers who spend their off-quest time causing trouble. To solve the town's adventurer problem, the mayor sends all of the local adventuring parties on quests. But Wiebe's series departs from the regular formula at this point: rather than goblins to kill at the end of a trek through treacherous mountains, the queens find an assassin, as do the other parties—the Peaches, the Four Daves, Brother Ponies, and Obsidian Darkness. This twist in genre expectations touches off a series of events that lead, by the second volume, to a confrontation with the man behind the assassins, the bereaved merchant Gerrig, who seeks revenge on Captain Sawyer (a former assassin himself) for killing his wife and who exacts revenge by summoning servants of the Lovecraft-inspired god N'Rygoth to destroy the queens (because Sawyer is in love with Hannah). This invocation of the weird turns *Rat Queens* into a save-the-world epic fantasy story, and Wiebe develops characters through flashbacks that, for example, flesh out the world of the dwarves, where Violet was a bearded princess, and give background on Hannah that sets up the conflicts of the third volume, which sees another transformation in the series' intertextual use of fantasy.

Volume 3, *Demons*, marks an artistic shift in the series, as Tess Fowler takes over art duties (the last few issues of Volume 2 were done by Croatian artist Stjepan Šejić after the original artist, Roc Upchurch, was arrested for domestic violence). Fowler's tenure is by far the best suited, of the four main artists, to the series' characters, as she does more than the other artists to bring alive the striking range of emotions felt by the queens; in doing so, her art deepens the narrative from an emotional standpoint at a time in the series when Wiebe was attempting to move away from writing a merely "fun" or humorous comic and was trying to tell difficult stories about friendship and family (glimpsed, but neither narratively nor artistically fulfilled, in *RQV2*). Aptly named *Demons*, *RQV3* explores Hannah's past and her former possession by a demon, while at a magic university à la *Harry Potter's* Hogwarts (or Ursula K. Le Guin's earlier wizard school in the *Earthsea* books). The volume centers around the queens' journey to the university to save Hannah's father, who was imprisoned by the university's Council of Nine for leading an insurrection to bring back academic freedom (i.e., studying necromancy). Following conflicts with the other queens, brought on by their fear of her increasingly impulsive behavior and discovery of her demonic past, Hannah once again embraces her inner demon,

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and the volume ends with her radical transformation into a head-shaved, demon-horned, cigarette-smoking punk who murders university guards, is imprisoned by the Council, and is abandoned by her friends (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hannah's transformation. Kurtis J. Wiebe (writer), and Tess Fowler (artist), *Rat Queens*, Volume 3: Demons, Image Comics/Shadowline Productions, 2016.

At this point in its publishing history, *Rat Queens* went on sabbatical. It was briefly published as a webcomic before returning with *RQV4*, which saw all of the queens, Hannah included, together again doing their usual adventuring. This led to some confusion among fans, but most assumed a story reboot. The fourth volume focused on a single adventure to recover some treasure, which turned out to be an evil frog-man wizard's attempt to trap and defeat the queens. The volume also adds family drama in the form of an adventuring party led by Violet's brother to mock and mimic each of the queens (including a senile Elvis-impersonator wizard, another wizard who grows fungus on his body, and a possibly sentient mushroom person). *RQV4* is by far the zaniest of the volumes, combing over its awkward ignoring of the *RQV3* conclusion with jokes on jokes. *RQV5*, though also filled with humorous plot points common to the series (e.g., hipster club owners who kidnap the fungus wizard to create locally sourced craft recipes), brings emotional seriousness back by revealing that the events of *RQV4* played out in an alternative reality that separated from the conclusion of *RQV3*. Thus, when *RQV4* starts with Hannah and the gang going on adventures, with no comment about her traumatic abandonment, it is because in this world, the queens never abandoned Hannah. The evil reality-bending wizard the queens face off against in *RQV5* is the Hannah who was abandoned at the end of *RQV3*, who punishes and kills the queens one by one throughout the fifth volume in order to teach the queens a lesson: not to abandon friends. By the volume's end, she restores them all to life (or, rather, erases the events of *RQV5* from history) and leaves only Betty with the knowledge of the alternative realities so that Betty, the kindest among them, can "tell you about the Hannah we left behind" (*RQV5*).

As this brief summary of *Rat Queens* shows, genre plays a key role throughout the series, not only as the main frame of the narrative, which is unapologetically a fantasy comic, but also as a tool for metatextually engaging the history of the fantasy genre across media, an

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aspect of the comic's overall aesthetic that I ascribe to Ngai's category of the interesting. Moreover, this summary suggests that while *Rat Queens* often plays genre tropes for jokes and relies heavily on zany and cute to make meaning and curry appeal, beneath it all, Wiebe builds on an emotionally powerful story about friendship and found family that is often at the heart of the best fantasy. The affective depths of *Rat Queens* are a hallmark of the Image brand of comics, which I will explore more in the coda to this chapter; they are also, in part, a result of the aesthetic sensibilities the series rallies to engage its audience and tell its story. *Rat Queens* frames its self-presentation as a fantasy comic, performs gendered and sexual politics, and critiques its role as commodity object through an appeal to the aesthetic categories of the zany, cute, and interesting.

Rat Queens and Our Aesthetic Categories

Ngai's work on the aesthetic categories of postmodernism argues that aesthetic sensibilities are carefully imbricated with our political economy; as a result, the aesthetic and affective registers of culture are both symptoms of and important tools for the critical understanding of how we relate to the capitalist system. Ngai finds in zaniness, cuteness, and the interesting that "[n]o other aesthetic categories in our current repertoire speak to ... everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption in the same direct way" (1). Indeed, these aesthetics describe the multiple meanings of a series such as *Rat Queens* and, beyond that, point to the constitutive relationship between aesthetics and genre both in this series and also in other projects published by Image Comics. Zaniness, cuteness, and the interesting can be seen at every level of the comic: in the art, the narrative, and the dialogue. They act in both discrete moments and as overarching logics of the series.

Wiebe tries for edgy, sexual, shocking, and crude dialogue as often as possible, indexing both the performative qualities of zaniness and the discursive, genre-reflective qualities of the interesting. Take, for example, one of the earliest lines from the comic, when Sawyer chastises the adventurers for their partying and brawling: "actually, I'm not annoyed, I'm really hotter than a dragon getting his dick tickled" (*RQV1*). The line makes little practical sense, since it mixes meanings—anger beyond annoyance; sexual arousal—but it plays off its own incoherence with reference to a worldbuilding cornerstone of fantasy, dragons, which are occasionally written as temperamental (cf. Tolkien's Smaug in *The Hobbit*). In the end, Sawyer's meaning is less important than the fact that Wiebe got the reader to imagine a dragon getting a hand job, something that both undermines dragons' usual veneration as ancient, powerful beings in fantasy and also sends the message that the genre tends to take itself too seriously, to pretend that people don't talk about hand jobs or do drugs or make crude jokes as in real life. To be fair to Wiebe, Betty mocks Sawyer's phrasing a few panels later, asking whether he meant to say he was sexually aroused by the adventurers' drunkenness or if dragons get angry when they are given hand jobs. Invoking cuteness in the form of a small person's seeming innocence and with a sincerity seemingly incongruous to joke and situation alike, Betty is serious; she is both confused about Sawyer's meaning and curious to know if dragons enjoy manual stimula-

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tion—so much so that when she meets a dragon in *RQV3*, she asks him about it in full sincerity.

This early scene establishes something of a pattern for the deployment of these aesthetics throughout *Rat Queens*. Cuteness, which Ngai describes as referring to the “basic human and social competences” of “intimacy and care” (13), is almost always invoked by the smidgen Betty—cute not only by virtue of her size (this aesthetic evinces a fetishization of the small and petite) but also by the incongruousness of her overly sincere and loving regard for the world and others. But cuteness is not only sensuousness, sweetness, and happy smidgens. As Ngai notes, “cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things,’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (3). Indeed, the plot of *RQV5* might be described as (the evil version of) Hannah’s attempt to drive Betty slowly crazy, to break her down emotionally, to make her feel the same abandonment that evil-Hannah felt when she was abandoned at the end of *RQV3*. So while Betty is the site of cuteness and its innocence throughout, she is at the same time an object, a plaything, as a result of the same helplessness that cuteness is meant to render. Wiebe, however, does not have Betty reject the aesthetic register of cute in order to orchestrate some grand defeat of evil-Hannah; instead, the character traits that are symptomatic of Betty’s cuteness become her and the queens’ salvation when her sincere love for her friends stops evil-Hannah from destroying them. A marginal aesthetic of the small and hyper-commodified, and one largely understood to be at odds with the masculine heroism of fantasy, cuteness more than once saves the day in *Rat Queens*. As the example of Betty shows, aesthetics in the series are occasionally—and rather significantly—mapped onto individual characters, but for the most part, they do not map neatly and are instead dispersed across the series. They operate as moving signifiers that bounce from character to character, scene to scene, and infuse the series’ logic. This is especially true of the zany and the interesting, which seem to have the greatest hold on Wiebe’s aesthetic vision of the series and which attest to the larger aesthetic relation of Image to the comics industry.

Zaniness, as Ngai describes it, is unusual among aesthetic categories because it is typically experienced in the form of a singular character, who can be pointed to and described as “the zany” (e.g., Lucy of *I Love Lucy*). In *Rat Queens*, no singular figure is always zany, but Hannah perhaps comes closest, since, as Ngai explains, the zany figure is one to be enjoyed at a distance—a truism of Hannah’s relationship to her friends (and on-again-off-again lover Sawyer) in the first three volumes and confirmed in her evil self’s return in *RQV5*. Moreover, Ngai notes of the zany that it is always in motion, typically from activity to activity, job to job, so that the zany’s labor status is that of “the perpetual temp, extra, or odd-jobber—itinerant and malleable” (10). This perfectly describes the queens, who take on quest after quest in a seemingly endless attempt to make ends meet. More than once, the queens remark on their need to pay rent in Palisade, invoking conversations about the tenuousness of property ownership and financial stability in a supposedly premodern fantasy world that nonetheless operates within decidedly capitalist paradigms. Indeed, the orc Braga joins the team in *RQV4* to make ends meet after her previous adventuring party splits up, and she notes that the best way to survive a tough

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economy is to own property that can be rented out. All of this suggests the basic criticism that fantasy is, well, a fantasy of the petit bourgeois, but beyond that, the series' conception of a party of adventurers going on quest after quest to make the rent, barely leaving any money for leisure (and quickly spending the money on drinking), points to the underlying meritocratic capitalist fantasy of the *D&D* story model: characters go out, gain experience, and slowly move up in the world, gaining riches, glory, and, at some point, the status of property owner and rentier. Only, in *Rat Queens*, the characters never move up in the world; after five years and thirty-plus comics and having saved Palisade multiple times, the queens face the same money problems each issue. The zaniness of *Rat Queens* manifests as a critique of the political-economic make-believe of pseudo-medieval fantasy worlds like those popular in *D&D*, *World of Warcraft*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. *Rat Queens*' zaniness underscores that the life of a fantasy adventurer is a rarely a quest for power or glory but instead a hustle.

Zaniness also marks and undercuts the gender politics of *Rat Queens*. To be clear, gender haunts the series at the level of labor. The series' main selling point was its gender flipping of the *D&D* fantasy adventure, making all the characters women and emphasizing their gender as a basis for humor. It was originally created by an all-male team, writer Wiebe and artist Upchurch. Early reviews of the series did not comment on the all-male creative team behind *Rat Queens*, but the situation highlights the gender disparity in the comics industry, not only at the level of representation, which has been thoroughly discussed in scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality in comics, but also at the level of creators. When *Rat Queens* debuted in 2013, female creators made up between 11 percent and 14.1 percent of the comics industry (Hanley). In 2014, artist Upchurch was arrested for "battery-family violence," a major problem for a series about strong women (Johnston). Upchurch was replaced by Šejčić, well known for his highly sexualized female-led comics published by Top Cow and his own erotic webcomic *Sunstone*. Šejčić's art brought the first nude scene to the comic and also emphasized the dramatic horror of N'Rygoth's demonic monsters (which look like giant vaginas with teeth) in *RQV2*. Fowler followed Šejčić (with colors by Tamra Bonvillain), but Fowler's time was overshadowed by rumors that Upchurch would be welcomed back to the book, regular posts on *Rat Queens* social media about Upchurch's original art, and Wiebe's continued public friendship with and support for Upchurch (Jusino). Fowler was fired from the series over "creative differences" (Jusino) and replaced by Owen Gieni, who oversaw *Rat Queens*' return to regular publication with *RQV4*—beginning what is the comic's zaniest period in storytelling, with Gieni's art varying wildly in quality and style and the queens facing wacky bad guys such as a giant magical goose and a reality-bending frog man. This publication history attests to an industry-wide problem with gender parity in comics production and also reflects, not incidentally, on the presentation of gender in the comic as not a political statement so much as an aesthetic one.

Zaniness is fundamentally an aesthetic of performance. For Ngai, it is also heavily gendered. Moreover, if the interesting is an aesthetic that indexes the economic mode of capitalist circulation and if cuteness indexes consumption, then zaniness is an aesthetic that symptomatizes production and offers reflections on, even critiques of, labor. Indeed, as

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noted, *Rat Queens* does not shy away from critically unraveling the “odd job” labor practices at work in the *D&D* fantasy adventure (and perhaps, by analogy, the largely for-hire comics industry). The zany’s critique of labor is also affective, pointing to the ways in which the post-Fordist world of neoliberalism places laborers in “zany” situations whereby they serve as the performer/creator of affective ties between people and communities; the tensions this creates, between the laborer and those for whom s/he or she labors, are part of the comedy of the text. The comedy of the zany (e.g., Richard Pryor in *The Toy*, Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*) reflects a new status of labor that has become, in Ngai’s reading, decidedly ungendered, and precisely because of this, “the *question* of gender becomes internal to post-Fordist zaniness,” so that the aesthetics of the zany turn the text into a performative playground of gender and (re)productive anxieties (Ngai 210). Unsurprisingly, these anxieties about production show up in the comic’s actual production history and in some reviewers’ frustration with the continued existence of the comic (Collins), where the writer’s unwillingness to fully split from an artist whose violence against his wife was well documented has become a clear and uncomfortable indication of the state of gender equality and social justice in the comics industry, even among those who write and publish books, such as *Rat Queens*, that are all about strong female characters.

The question of gender is obviously central to *Rat Queens*; it is the series’ sole impetus for production, to turn the largely male fantasy adventure on its head, to populate it with gendered stereotypes (the Marie Laveau knockoff, the rockabilly babe, the hipster, the hippie), and to breathe “life” into those stereotypes through the characters’ wacky encounters and raucously uncouth behavior. The queens say “fuck” (and “fucktart,” “dickcheese,” “cunt,” etc.) often, not because real women say “fuck” often but because Wiebe wants readers to know he “gets” it, he knows patriarchy exists, but on the whole, the series does little to critique patriarchy and its structural violence. That all these aspects are part of the gist of *Rat Queens*, rather than a contextualized aspect of its world-building, reveals as artifice the queens’ supposedly nontraditional performance of gender; they are nontraditional only insofar as their difference from the norm is highlighted as (performatively) excessive, wacky, strange—in a word, zany. Gender is the final joke of *Rat Queens*, the zany zing that winds through the series and animates it, so that even as the narrative addresses economic woes through the “stressed-out, even desperate quality” of its characters’ attempt to fit the precarious economic position of the fantasy adventurer (Ngai 185), it does so always through the emphatic presentation of the difference of women—in a *D&D* fantasy setting, who say “dickcheese” (*RQV1*) and eat psychedelic mushrooms for lunch and get into crazy bar fights, who are boisterous and voluptuous and smart and funny, all the things “woke” men, perhaps as Wiebe imagines himself to be, are meant to find attractive in contemporary feminist women—as the final performative end of the comic’s humor. In *Rat Queens*, gender in conversation with genre is performed as the zany object of the series.

The interesting, too, registers as another key aesthetic of the series, operating in similarly synoptic ways throughout *Rat Queens* to link the series’ aesthetic preferences with genre. If *Rat Queens*’ gimmick is that it gender-flips the *D&D* fantasy adventure, it can only succeed by virtue of the audience’s awareness of this project as intertextual with

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D&D and fantasy more broadly. Violet occasionally sports a beard, and Betty is an unabashedly sexual drug user; the humor of these things relies on understanding the source material they are departing from—in the case of Violet, the concept that dwarf women have beards, and in the case of Betty, that hobbits (which smidgens are based on) are conservative country folk. In both cases, the source text is *The Lord of the Rings*, filtered through the film adaptations and decades of similar jokes made by fantasy fans and *D&D* players. Much of the zaniness of *Rat Queens* is also only zany through similarly intertextual contexts. For example, in *RQV5*, multiple flashbacks and alternative-reality sequences are drawn in artistic styles that diverge heavily from Gieni's usual art, the purpose being to emphasize the distance between the present of the text and the past/alterity of the imposing scene. The imposition of these artistic styles is indeed zany, performative of the series' overall sense of wackiness and excessive need to make new meanings, but it is also only possible because each of the styles refers to another text. When the queens confront a mind-altering toad to save Betty's friend, they enter a world drawn in the style of Fleischer Studios animations from the 1930s, and when evil-Hannah, disguised as a powerful wizard, tells an "allegoric story ... a tad on the fucking nose" about her abandonment by the queens, the story is rendered in the style of the 1980s animated series *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (*RQV5*). All of this is a hallmark of the aesthetic of the interesting, which Ngai describes as "[a]lways registering a tension between the particular and the generic" (6).

Rat Queens defines itself through its intertextual relationship with other texts, making its own identity from their elements, but in doing so, as with its failure to critique gender while relying heavily on gender for self-definition, the series is less a critique à la the postmodern pastiche than it is about pointing to things the audience knows in order to generate audience recognition and the semblance of depth; it is generically deconstructive without revealing anything about the problems or interworkings of fantasy as a market genre. *Rat Queens'* aesthetic of the interesting draws attention to its own circulation practices, to its branding as an unselfconscious homage to all the fantasy things that people in Wiebe's demographic loved about fantasy (including the women, who are here less a feminist statement, perhaps, than the fulfillment of another kind of fantasy). And once again, this aesthetic activity is bound up with the series' generic situation: *Rat Queens* is interesting precisely because it knows about—and excessively, zany performs knowledge of—the genre it belongs to.

Coda: Image, Industry, and Aesthetics

In *Rat Queens*, aesthetics and genre are inseparable. To speak of the aspects of Wiebe's artistically troubled series that made it hot in the first place, namely, its zaniness with regard to gender and its evocation of the interesting in responding to and making use of the history of fantasy (not to mention cuteness, which is humorous in the series largely because the aesthetic is so anathema to the usual self-seriousness of fantasy adventure), is to speak always of *Rat Queens'* status as a contemporary fantasy comic. This reading of *Rat Queens* through Ngai's conceptualization of our contemporary aesthetics only

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scratches the surface of the ways in which aesthetics and genre are interwoven throughout the series. But it shows that a focus on aesthetics and genre has much to offer comics studies, which by and large emphasizes structural, political, and historical readings of comics. Of course, aesthetics and genre are integral to structure, politics, and history of/in comics. The position of gender in *Rat Queens*—which is tied to the broader cultural status of women and feminism in American society and the comics industry, as well as the production history of the series, and which is coded into its aesthetics and genre—evidences this.

I referred to *Rat Queens* as what Beaty and Woo call a “quality popular comic book,” which they define as “writer-driven, ground-level comics ... that garner critical acclaim and substantial, lasting sales by innovating on popular genres” (63). Their primary examples are *The Walking Dead*, written by Robert Kirkman and drawn by Charlie Adlard (after #6), and *Saga*, written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by Fiona Staples. While it is unfair to call either series writer-driven, insofar as their distinctive artistic styles contributed in large part to their success, this is certainly true of *Rat Queens*, where the multiple changes in artists have, if anything, distracted from the continuity of Wiebe’s otherwise complex plotting. But it is also worth noting that Beaty and Woo’s quintessential examples are bastions of Image’s success in the twenty-first century. Image and other indie publishers, which all remain entirely mainstream in their publication, circulation, and distribution strategies, even as they offer perks such as creative ownership to the writers and artists who work for them (compared, for example, to DC and Marvel, where nearly all work is for-hire), specialize in these “quality popular comic books,” which might otherwise simply be called boutique comics. Like *Rat Queens*, these comics fit a postmodern audience niche perfectly, are gleefully representative of diversity but rarely critical of the structures that make diversity so difficult to achieve and so necessary, and are only superficially mold-breaking where genre is concerned (though they market themselves as significant interventions in genre-as-usual). They are, for the most part—like *Rat Queens*, *Saga*, *Descender*, *Paper Girls*, *I Hate Fairyland*, and so many others, but with a few exceptions, such as *Bitch Planet* or *We Stand on Guard*—written and drawn to perfectly please and excite comics reviewers by appealing almost solely to the superficial, the faux avant-garde, and, as I have emphasized in this chapter, the cute, the zany, and the interesting.

Comics studies needs aesthetics and genre criticism in part because it helps identify, describe, historicize, and critique the artistic, labor, and production practices of the comic-book industry. *Rat Queens* is symptomatic of a set of aesthetics that themselves reflect on the political economy but also operate in much more superficial ways, as the treatment of gender and genre in *Rat Queens* shows. Image and other indie publishers survive on a mixture of boutique comics and franchise projects (e.g., Dark Horse and *Aliens*, IDW and *Star Trek*, most of Dynamite’s catalog). To put aesthetics and genre, but aesthetics especially, at the center of comics criticism is to better understand the artistic, narrative, and economic practices of the comic-book industry. This case study of *Rat Queens* details just one way in which a single comic utilizes aesthetics of the zany, cute, and interesting to speak to a niche audience of *D&D* and fantasy lovers, as well as to appeal through superficial attempts at diversity to a new, growing audience of nonwhite, nonmale, nonhetero-

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sexual readers. *Rat Queens* by and large succeeds, when not plagued by production issues that directly undercut its feminist message, but aesthetic critique helps us to see not only larger industry practices at work in this supposedly unique comic but also the ways in which art, genre, narrative, and politics are co-constitutive aspects of comic-book meaning making.

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Notes:

(1.) References are to the trade paperback volumes collecting *Rat Queens*, instead of to individual issues; as with most comics, the trade paperbacks lack pagination, so I don't attempt to give page numbers. Where possible, I describe the scenes so that it is easy to find them. For simplicity's sake, I abbreviate the contemporary comic-book industry's wordy titles, such as *Rat Queens, Volume 1: Sass & Sorcery* to *RQV1*, *Rat Queens, Volume*

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2: *The Far-Reaching Tentacles of N'Rygoth to RQV2*, *Rat Queens, Volume 3: Demons to RQV3*, and so on.

(2.) See, for example, Katherine Roeder on Winsor McCay and modernism or Hillary Chute on comics and postmodernism.

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