THE ANXIOUS AARDVARK SEES THE LIGHT: DIVINE MASCULINITY IN
DAVE SIM’S CEREBUS

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ABSTRACT

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For most of its existence, detractors of Cerebus—a comic that details the exploits of an anthropomorphic aardvark who often struggles against women for power—have accused the comic of misogyny. Certain critics have attempted to answer the charges of misogyny by arguing that Cerebus portrays gender as a social construction, but those critics must ignore crucial sections of the text in order to make such an argument. I attend to Cerebus as a whole by arguing that it critiques feminists for decrying patriarchal aggression even as they use the narrative of masculine conquest for their own benefit. Nonetheless, the text offers its own critique of the narrative of masculine conquest by constructing Jaka as a victim of masculine aggression and by portraying Cerebus as the anxious male. Having exposed the insufficiency of the phallic model of masculinity, Cerebus proposes an alternative conception of gender that is linked to the divine. Finally, the text undermines its own authority as a source of truth, mitigating the concern that it is a hegemonic text. Because Cerebus privileges the notion that gender is a position in a divine grammar, the text argues for a different kind of gender essentialism in which both men and women can participate in masculinity.
Dedicated to my wife, Hannah
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Introduction

"If the vote is a tie, the woman shall die. Better safe... when it comes to devils and vipers and scorpions... than sorry. And remember, you can always make more women" (Sim 2001c, 224). So says the eponymous hero of *Cerebus*—Dave Sim's six thousand-page comic book series—as he leads the local men in a vote on which women they will execute. For most of its existence, detractors of *Cerebus*—a comic that details the exploits of an anthropomorphic aardvark who often struggles against women for power—have accused the comic of misogyny. They read passages like the one above and accuse Sim of drawing *Cerebus* intending to foment hatred towards women. Rather than answer the charges of misogyny against *Cerebus*, I reformulate the debate to answer two questions. First, to what degree does *Cerebus* function as an anti-feminist text in its representation of women? Second, does *Cerebus* reinforce or subvert a narrative of masculine conquest?

Even a casual interaction with the many message boards, fan sites, and blogs that discuss *Cerebus* reveals that the greatest controversy surrounding the work is its representation of women. Sim's detractors have labeled him a misogynist. One former fan went as far as to say that "Until Sim can confess that he is the working definition of a
misogynist, I will never buy another comic written or illustrated by Dave Sim or acknowledge Dave Sim in any way ever again" (Champion 2008). While many fans can still appreciate Sim's comics regardless of his personal views, others conflate Cerebus and Sim, treating them as one entity.

The impulse to conflate Cerebus and Sim could very well end a productive scholarly conversation on Cerebus before it starts. People still debate whether Sim is a misogynist, and that debate would likely eclipse all other discourse on Cerebus if readers collapse Sim and his work into one entity. If the discourse on this graphic novel never rises above the question of misogyny, literary critics will likely ignore Cerebus altogether because of its reputation as a work that expresses a hatred for women. Such an outcome would be a loss for both the broader field of literary studies and the relatively new study of the graphic novel. While the former would benefit from the way that Sim confronts and defamiliarizes various aspects of contemporary discourses on gender, religion, and politics, the latter would gain from Sim's formal ingenuity. Sim often forces the reader to turn the book sideways or upside down in order to keep reading. He often intercuts his narratives with pages of uninterrupted prose. As critics of the graphic novel continue to unravel the ways that comics make meaning, Cerebus represents the testing and transgressing of the conventional boundaries that comics readers have come to expect. Critics must not ostracize a work with so much to offer on the basis of its reputation. At the same time, questions of gender, sex, and power find fertile ground in this mammoth text.

Critics must evaluate Cerebus apart from anything Sim says in an interview about the intellectual capacity of women. The fact that Sim (2008) has asserted that there is a
"substantial body of evidence—increasing every day—that indicates women are intellectually inferior to men," has no bearing on the meaning of his work. Umberto Eco (1992) has pointed out that once an author creates a work for the general public, that work exists independently of the author. For Eco, the text holds meaning—not so much the reader or the author. The artist "has the right to react as a model reader" (194). For instance, Eco may try to refute what he regards as an overinterpretation of Foucault's Pendulum, but he does so with the same facts at his disposal as any other reader. Eco must interpret his own novel, rather than simply say "I did not mean that!" Sim's (2005b) interactions with his fans affirm this idea. When presented with a reader's theory, he typically responds to it based on the textual evidence that supports or refutes the theory. Comments like "Well, that would be interesting, wouldn't it?" and "Well, obviously that would be my view," reflect that Cerebus contains a good deal of ambiguity, and that it is not the author's job to present the reader with the final, unquestionable reading of a work. Sim seems to agree with Eco that while the author creates the work, the reader interprets it. The author's intentions do not make one interpretation better than another. The text supplies possible meanings and allows for multiple interpretations. The text does not speak in a univocal language. Even if Sim were to tell an interviewer, "I hate women and I am a misogynist"—which he has not—it would not follow that Cerebus is a misogynistic graphic novel.

The few critics who have addressed the issue of misogyny in Cerebus have defended the text against such charges by arguing that Sim’s work shows that gender is a social construct. Dominick Grace (n.d.), for instance, argues that “In Cerebus, gender becomes not only amorphous but also an actively problematic concept” (1). Similarly,
Mario Nicholas Castro Villareal (n.d.) looks at “the concept of gender through a bourdieuan approach which considers gender as an arbitrary construction” (2). Not surprisingly, both authors focus on instances of cross dressing in the text, as well as Cerebus’ status as a hermaphrodite (Grace 4, 9-12; Villareal 8). As Judith Williamson points out in her study of cross-dressing in “It’s Different for Girls,” the act of cross-dressing itself is not an inherently rebellious act. In fact, because dressing in drag often amounts to a mockery of feminine traits, it tends to reinforce the superiority of men over women and the masculine over the feminine, rather than deconstructing the very idea of gender. Furthermore, Grace and Villareal seem to assume that society and biology are the only possible bases for gender, ruling out all other options.

Of course, Cerebus’ status as a hermaphrodite becomes unimportant in the last third of the series. In the final volume, The Last Day, the text even provides a warning against overemphasizing Cerebus-as-hermaphrodite. A religious splinter group interprets Cerebus’ nickname for Rick, “Girlyboy,” to mean “that Rick, like Cerebus, was a fully developed hermaphrodite and-owing to his greater size and weight-played the ‘butch’ role to Cerebus’ ‘femme’ role in their relationship” (Sim 2004, 99). The obvious lesson here is that focusing too much on Cerebus-as-hermaphrodite produces a gross misreading: Cerebus and Rick never exhibit homosexual urges, much less did they engage in a butch-femme relationship. The reader, who has presumably read Rick’s Story (volume 12), understands that the religious group in question has given Cerebus’ hermaphroditism too much significance. Grace takes this example and uses it to support the idea that Rick and Cerebus had a mother-child relationship, (10) even while recognizing in a footnote “that Sim here is skewering precisely the sort of self-serving
interpretive gesture I am engaged in myself in this paper” (15). Grace goes on to say that he is “inclined to trust the artist, not the art” (15). In other words, Grace ascribes to the same division of text and author proposed by Eco and Sim himself. Nonetheless, Grace does not have access to Sim’s intention on this particular passage, he rather assumes to know the author’s intent because the text so obviously disparages such a reading. This leads to the primary dilemma of claiming that *Cerebus* argues that gender is a social construct. As a rhetorical gesture, it could be an effective claim, but it does not account for the text as a whole. To make such a claim, one must say little about the final third of the story, in which Cerebus finally conquers Estarcion, establishes a fascist patriarchy with strict gender roles, and discovers from divine revelation that masculinity is superior to femininity.

I attend to *Cerebus* as a whole (final third included) by arguing that it critiques feminists for decrying patriarchal aggression even as they use the narrative of masculine conquest for their own benefit. Nonetheless, the text offers its own critique of the narrative of masculine conquest by constructing Jaka as a victim of masculine aggression and by portraying Cerebus as the anxious male. Having exposed the insufficiency of the phallic model of masculinity, *Cerebus* proposes an alternative conception of gender that is linked to the divine. Finally, the text undermines its own authority as a source of truth, mitigating the concern that it is a hegemonic text.
Mothers and Daughters and Princesses

Sim has constructed *Cerebus* as a self-contained world that operates according to its own logic and the conventions of the graphic novel. An outstanding convention of the graphic novel generally—and of *Cerebus* in particular—is the notion of "cartooning. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (1994) compares cartooning to the realistic portrait, asserting that "By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30-31). McCloud notes that film critics will often use the term "cartoon" when discussing live action films to denote when a character or story takes on intensified symbolic meaning. Cartooning becomes a tool with which the author can bring certain details or ideas into focus, just as a frame can exclude or intensify certain details in a photograph. Sim cartoons the characters Cirin, Astoria, and Jaka to great effect. The reader can easily identify them with second wave feminism, third wave feminism, and traditional patriarchy, respectively.

In his famous "Tangent" essay, which was originally printed in issue 186, Sim (2001a) referred to women as "emotion-based beings," yet the character of Astoria completely subverts such a notion. The text produces a female character who is defined by her intellect, in spite of Sim's belief that women are intellectually inferior to men. For Astoria, emotions are tools for power. In *High Society*, the second volume of the series,
she often manipulates the Roach's feelings of anger, sadness, or love to accomplish her goals. More importantly, she uses the stereotype of the irrational woman to trick Cerebus. After the Moon Roach kills a banker at Astoria's behest, Cerebus follows him back to Astoria's house. After Cerebus explains his intentions to turn the Roach in, Astoria attempts to dissuade him by crying. When that fails to deter the aardvark, she tearfully suggests that he take the Moon Roach costume. In order to cover up her part in the Roach's murders, she emphasizes her irrationality, saying, "I should never have kept it—somewhere in the back of my mind, I always hoped he could give up the Moon Roach voluntarily." In a final effort, she stresses her own emotional frailty (Sim draws uneven lines around her body to suggest quivering, see figure 1) and tells Cerebus, "Then you shan't feel too badly when I kill myself." When Astoria later appears in the aardvark's hotel suite, it becomes clear that she was using the narrative of the emotionally frail woman to her advantage. She quivers to get what she wants. When quivering does not work, she drops the façade, revealing her intellect. In the first of these two scenes, Astoria's irrationality is marked by her constant movement. In the second scene, Astoria remains stationary, and the artist juxtaposes lack of movement and immutably closed eyes with the frenzied action of Cerebus' fight with the Roach (see figure 2).

Furthermore, she quickly establishes control over the other two, telling Cerebus to agree to a 3 percent "increase on Palnan goods," and telling the Roach to go away. Both obey. This scene cements Astoria's status as a stoic and rational character who knows the dominant discourse on gender and uses it for her own gain.

Astoria's rationality defies the stereotype of the overly-emotional woman, but the most important facet of her character is that she is a stand-in for third-wave feminism.
Figure 1: Astoria feigns emotional weakness (Sim 1986, 115).
Third wave feminism describes the various types of feminism that both sprouted out of and began to question second wave feminism. Many of this new generation winced under the controlling tendencies of their intellectual forerunners, especially in relation to sex (Queen and Comella 2008, 274-275; Tong 2009, 3-5). As Cirin's rebellious daughter, Astoria represents the next stage in the movement—Kevilism. Astoria's Kevilist movement opposes Cirinism in its dislike of rigid hierarchies. Significantly, while Cirin wants to regulate what can and cannot be published in regards to sex, Astoria views sex as one of her greatest weapons. By the fifth panel of Astoria's introduction, she has seduced the Roach so that she can use him as her personal assassin (“Hey—what d'yu think yer doin’? Hey! Heyymph!” says the Roach, off to the side of the panel). Thirty pages later, she tries the same trick with Cerebus. She grabs the aardvark and rolls around with him on the floor. Cerebus threatens to hurt her if she does not stop, to which she replies, "Ooooh! That sounds like fun!" (Sim 1986, 47). Cirin and Astoria have written manifestoes for their respective movements, and in Astoria's she writes, "The penis is an organ without scruple, without humanity, without common sense. Those women who understand this fact and make use of it have at their command all the resources of the modern world" (Sim 1994, 8). While many Second-wave Feminists saw sex as a tool of Patriarchy, Astoria, like sex-positive third-wave feminists, sees sex as a tool for the liberation of women.

Astoria's character arch forms Cerebus's first major criticism of the feminist movement. Whether she is manipulating the Iestan legislature, the Iestan financial institutions, or Cerebus, every action Astoria takes is for more power, but power for the
Figure 2: Astoria becomes a stationary figure amidst a whirlwind of irrationality (Sim 1986, 132).
sake of freedom for herself and other women. She supports Republicanism in Iest because she believes that "in time, that it can lead to women getting the vote" (Sim 1986, 502). By the eighth volume of the story, however, Astoria begins to see "the hypocrisy of her own position." She wanted to teach her followers, the Kevillists, to be strong, independent women. Her movement was to have no leaders, and they would share decision-making. Yet, she acted as a despot guiding her followers "towards blind and unquestioning obedience" (Sim 1994, 205). Astoria uses the narrative of equality to mask her real motive of gaining power for its own sake. Consequently, Cerebus critiques Third-wave Feminists not for lacking intelligence or even for its agenda of equality, but for manipulating others with the ideology of freedom—in effect, using the idea of freedom to gain power over others, thereby repeating a narrative of domination.

In spite of this critique, Sim allows Astoria to redeem herself, transcending her status as a rational would-be autocrat. Astoria's character arch reaches its conclusion when Suenteus Po deftly argues that political and religious power imprison the individual, even the one wielding the power. He addresses Astoria, Cirin, and Cerebus. He tells Astoria that she was free the moment she left her entourage, and could have remained free had she escaped into the anonymity of the crowds. He exposes their hypocrisy. For all his efforts, Astoria is the only one who listens. Sim grants Astoria a moment of enlightenment. While Po spoke, the panels focused on him. Several panels zoom in on Po's face—Po physically fills the space of the comic, producing the effect of an enlarged presence and authority (Sim 1995, 84). Having been confronted with her own hypocrisy, Astoria gives a speech in which she and her words fill pages. As she
confesses to various misdeeds, Sim splits the page into three panels, each one containing Astoria's profile. Cerebus and Cirin stand in the middle, and Astoria dwarfs them, signifying that she has reached a heightened state of mind (see figure 3). In this heightened state, she recognizes that her actions have all been for the sake of more power: "It's a charade" (100). She recognizes that more power will only imprison her. Astoria leaves the church, giving up all efforts to dominate others. Despite the fact that Astoria is the least masculine of the characters involved in this scene, Sim establishes her as a wise character willing to change in pursuit of freedom. Astoria represents a critique of third-wave feminism, yet her choice to remove herself from the struggle for power shows that she now sees the performative contradiction of amassing personal power for the sake of freedom. Her choice implies that feminists are not wrong to desire equality for women. Rather, Cerebus insists that feminists are wrong to use that narrative as a means to domination.

Cirin represents the appropriation of the militant aggression that feminists would typically attribute to patriarchy. bell hooks, for instance, defines patriarchy as,

a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (hooks 2004, 18). Cirin takes this definition and replaces "patriarchy" with "matriarchy." Rather than oppose patriarchal masculinity with a new template of femininity, Cirin adopts those destructive masculine behaviors. Sim codes Cirin as a masculine character by drawing her as a physically imposing figure—larger than most of the characters with whom she
Figure 3: Astoria looms large over Cirin and Cerebus in a moment of triumph (Sim 1995, 99).
shares the frame (see figure 4)—but he also chooses to draw her as a cloaked figure. The image invokes Islamic nations that require women to be covered at all times. Perhaps more importantly, her cloak suggests her status as an assassin, covert violence being the crux of her power. The cloak and its link to fascism imply that *Cerebus* does not critique the movement for women's equality, or even the idea that women are superior to men, but rather exposes the impulse to use the ideology of women's rights to dominate others and inhibit their freedom.

Sim's critique gains greater force when one realizes that Cirin stands in not only for second wave feminism, but second wave feminism as embodied by Catharine MacKinnon. Oddly enough, MacKinnon (1987) sees quilts as an exemplar of women's artistic contributions to society (39). Judith Evans (1995) goes as far as to say that a "woman-culture" for MacKinnon "is about making quilts" (88). Like MacKinnon, Cirin conceives of her movement in terms of quilt-making. As Cirinism spreads, quilting circles become the center of economic and political life—a place to trade information, distribute resources, and, of course, create works of art (Sim 1996, 154, 161).

More importantly, Cirin resembles MacKinnon in her obsession with censorship. What is perhaps MacKinnon's most outstanding feature as a writer is her unrelenting opposition to pornography. As a lawyer, MacKinnon (2006) argues that pornography violates the Constitutional right to equality (80). More concretely, she (1991) has stated that pornography "is a technologically sophisticated traffic in women" (195). In short, MacKinnon argues that pornography should be illegal. In a similar vein, Cirin's regime outlaws all activity that objectifies women. For instance, the Cirinists arrest Jaka because she is a dancer in a tavern. In fact, they originally intend to execute her for her crimes,
Figure 4: Cirin’s imposing physicality (Sim 1995, 153).
but Jaka claims diplomatic immunity as the niece of Lord Julius. In the same instance, the Cirinists arrest Oscar because he is a "book writer" (Sim 1990, 342). He has "No artistic license" (352). Read in this light, *Cerebus* critiques MacKinnon, and second wave feminism as a whole, for attempting to regulate what types of speech are legally permissible.

Sim extends this critique when he explains the origin of Cirinism in *Minds*. When Sim enters his own world as the character, "Dave," he explains to Cerebus that Cirin hijacked both her name and her movement from the real Cirin. The original Cirin was a scholar who created a movement based on simple living, equality, and economic independence for women. Cirin the aardvark, whose name was originally Serna, led the communal safety branch of the revolution. As the revolution grows, the communal safety officers contribute less to the work force and take more of the resources. Eventually, Cirin the aardvark decides to avoid the consequences of her actions and take complete control of the revolution in one stroke. Either through psychic manipulation or old fashioned interrogation, she convinces her followers that she is Cirin, and that the real Cirin is actually Serna, head of communal safety. She declares "Serna" a traitor to the revolution, then orders her minions to shave Serna's head and sow her lips shut to prevent her from revealing the truth. This incident resembles the myth of Philomela, whose brother-in-law, Tereus, raped her and cut out her tongue to silence her. Tereus' actions indicate a desire to suppress the feminine voice and control a woman's ability to talk with whomever she pleases. Similarly, Cirin's actions expose her penchant for censorship, and her movement is built upon the silencing of a woman. Sim the artist makes the parallel explicit in his attention to "Serna's" blood-drenched and later atrophied mouth (see figure
5). Cirin's decision to silence "Serna" is a misogynistic act of mythic proportions. She has co-opted patriarchal tactics. She compromises her movement by adopting the very narrative she ostensibly opposes.

This myth is especially relevant to this episode of Cerebus because of the response by Procne, Philomela's sister and Tereus' wife. Philomela weaves a tapestry detailing what happened and sends it to Procne, who decides to punish her husband by killing their son and serving him to Tereus as a meal. This choice parallels Cirin's actions, as Jessica Lugo (2007) observes, "[Procne] has adopted his [Tereus'] barbarous nature, and decides by a primal, vengeful code of honour that Tereus' punishment should fit his crime" (403). Like Procne, Cirin retaliates against male domination, but does so by adopting the same logic as that oppressive ideology. Cirin's matriarchy is built upon patriarchal domination, upon the silencing of women.

Cirin's interactions with her underlings cement the idea that she embodies the feminine appropriation of patriarchal domination. In a moment of clarity in Women, Cirin confesses to General Greer that she encourages her "own sycophants" to flatter her. She admits that when she reviewed transcripts of conversations, "All that would cause offense to me was excluded, stripped away and hidden from me. Like a man. Very like a man." (Sim 1994, 150) Again, Cirin silences all dissent, but she recognizes her hypocrisy, at least for a moment. Because the comment, "Like a man," comes from Cirin, this moment should hardly be taken as Sim's admission that men inherently silence dissent. Cirin realizes that she exemplifies the destructive stereotype of masculinity that she herself condemns. Not surprisingly, Cirin later executes General Greer for agreeing
Figure 5: The original Cirin’s atrophied mouth (Sim 1996, 169).
that she was "Like a man," on grounds of treason against the goddess (165), thus silencing another female voice to eliminate the threat to her power. By repeating scenarios in which Cirin judges what types of speech are acceptable and punishes women who violate her arbitrary limits, Sim turns MacKinnon's (1987) own critique of patriarchy back on her: "...when you are powerless, you don't just speak differently. A lot, you don't speak. Your speech is not just differently articulated, it is silenced. Eliminated, gone. You aren't just deprived of a language with which to articulate your distinctiveness, although you are; you are deprived of a life out of which articulation might come." (39) *Cerebus* implies that by trying to silence certain types of speech, MacKinnon uses the same tactics of domination that she decry.

While Astoria and Cirin represent powerful women using egalitarian ideology to gain more power, Sim cartoons Jaka as a victim of masculine domination, patriarchal ideology. Jaka has no identity outside of the men in her life—whether it be Lord Julius, Pud, Rick, or Cerebus. Jaka's identity as a dancer affords her some level of independence, but she ultimately sacrifices that identity by marrying Rick, and that marriage fails to live up to its promise. Jaka must support Rick, who spends his time with Oscar instead of looking for work. The marriage culminates with Rick striking Jaka and declaring his hatred for her after discovering that she aborted her first pregnancy. That Jaka's marriage is concluded by an episode of male violence affirms her status as a victim. Thus, *Cerebus* characterizes patriarchy, via its representation of marriage, as a system that perpetrates violence against women.

If Sim's indictment of traditional marriage is softened because Jaka's marriage to Rick in *Jaka's Story* is less than traditional, Sim concretely emphasizes how marriage
destroys Jaka in *Minds*. During his conversation in space with the aardvark, Dave runs through multiple hypothetical scenarios in which Cerebus and Jaka are married, all of them resulting in Cerebus abusing Jaka. In the first scenario, Jaka is submissive but unhappy. Dave explains that she plans to leave and that he "can make her love you—but I can't make her love stronger than her need to be happy... or her instinct for self-preservation" (Sim 1996, 209). This first marital scenario presents traditional, male-led marriage as a dreary proposition for women. Sim constructs patriarchal marriage as boring in the most extreme sense.

The first scenario hints at possible abuse, but the second brings domestic violence to the fore. Cerebus demands that Dave create a story in which Jaka will be happy no matter what, which results in Cerebus hitting Jaka in the eye and then the nose. Sim captures the brutality of the situation by placing Cerebus's fist at the center of the frame (see figure 6). Realizing that Jaka will look ugly if he hits her, he tells Dave, "Okay! You make her happy to stay with Cerebus no matter what. *And* you make it so Cerebus never hits her *ever*, or threatens to hit her." What follows is a 24-page story in which Cerebus cheats on Jaka, and she hangs herself. No matter how Dave modifies the rules of each story, each ends unhappily: first with intense boredom, then with violence, then with infidelity and suicide. These three scenarios suggest that marriage is an inherently unsafe and unhappy state of being for women. Far from arguing for male dominance and superiority, *Cerebus* destabilizes patriarchal domination.

Another instance in which Jaka is subject to masculine domination exists only in the mind of Pud, the tavern owner from the sixth volume. Throughout *Jaka's Story*, Pud fantasizes about Jaka. With each imagined interaction, he comes closer and
Figure 6: Cerebus hits Jaka in imagined marriage scenario number two (Sim 1996, 210).
closer to raping her. Finally, when he approaches Jaka with the intention of raping her, she vomits on him, preventing him from carrying out his fantasy. Pud's repeated fantasy unmasks the danger of a femininity that identifies women as sex objects. His exchange with Jaka is economic in nature: she dances in his tavern, and he pays her in groceries. In his mind, Jaka should offer her body as a commodity in exchange for goods from his store. Pud is the product of an ideology that treats women not as people but as sex objects. By cultivating the fraught relationship between Jaka and Pud, *Cerebus* critiques the notion that men should control women. Sim presents a world in which the patriarchal structure manufactures male-female relations that encourage men to rape women.

One of the worst abuses Jaka suffers comes when Lord Julius, her uncle, molests her. This is a point that gains much of its force from its subtlety. The reader only knows that Jaka was sexually abused from feverish dreams she has involving phallic insects, apparently full of semen. The author's preoccupation with sexual violence highlights the tyranny of a system in which women are subservient to men. Sim (2005a) has refrained from naming a culprit, but he has admitted that "Lord Julius would obviously be a suspect." As the only male character with any connection to Jaka’s past, he is the only suspect. Nonetheless, the story itself suggests Julius as Jaka's abuser. In his cosmic exchange with Cerebus, Dave relates how Jaka has commissioned a painting of herself and Lord Julius, calling it, "Her first tentative step on the road to a brighter future where she will escape the prison in which she finds herself. She will rediscover the world... and, in so doing,... rediscover herself" (Sim 1996, 144). Jaka herself chose the content of the painting and hopes to use it to express how she feels to Lord Julius, yet the painting
contains truths of which Jaka is not consciously aware. In M. Zulli's painting, Jaka sits with her arms wrapped around her legs, protecting her breasts and vagina (see figure 7). On the other side of the frame, Lord Julius stands in front of a podium, fingering a cigar in his left hand—the phallic object—while his right hand sits in his pocket—a vaginal symbol. The artist’s choice to occupy Lord Julius's hands with both a phallic and vaginal object evokes the molestation of a young girl, unable to engage in sexual intercourse. This painting reconstructs Lord Julius’s violation of his niece, simultaneously providing an explanation for his avoidance of her. This reading of the painting is supported by Jaka’s choice of M. Zulli as her artist. Zulli's audition painting portrayed Jaka masturbing while wearing the Palnan flag. At least unconsciously, Jaka understood that what she wanted to express to her uncle was sexual in nature. The idea that an uncle would molest his niece is damning. The critique is stronger in this case, however, because Lord Julius was the source of Jaka’s identity as the Princess of Palnu. It was that context that allowed, perhaps even encouraged, Lord Julius to violate his niece. He molestes her because he is the source of her identity. That Cerebus cartoons Jaka as a casualty of masculine oppression fits well with bell hooks's description of patriarchy as a system that preys upon "everyone deemed weak, especially females." Sim's work may not be a rallying cry for sisterhood, but it is certainly much more feminist-friendly than many have given it credit. Jaka functions primarily as a critique of patriarchy. Because Sim makes victimhood her outstanding feature, she brings to the light the predatory tendencies of phallic masculinity.
Figure 7: Jaka’s commissioned painting (Sim 1996, 142-143).
Cerebus as the Anxious Aardvark

*Cerebus* uses its female characters to critique feminism for repeating a narrative of masculine domination for its own benefit. As Alice Ferrebe (2005) has observed, “The gender [masculinity] remains in danger of becoming a kind of conceptual scapegoat, conveniently encompassing every mode of behavior or expression that is technocratic, bullying, or violent” (197). Because masculinity is so often equated with dominance, inside and outside of critical scholarship, men are left with few options. Alternative masculinities are left at the margins of the dominant discourse.

Stephen Ducat (2004) frames this problem in terms of anxious masculinity. He argues that “the very foundation of male selfhood from antiquity to the modern era . . . is the fear of being feminized” (1). Because masculinity is framed in terms of opposition, men learn to fear identification with women as a threat to their masculinity. For Ducat, the perception that masculinity requires conquest is built around the desire to possess the phallus, “the mythic, permanently erect archetypal monolith of masculine omnipotence that signifies untrammeled growth, invulnerability, and freedom from all dependency” (2). In contrast, the organ that men actually possess—the penis—is in most cases soft and in all cases vulnerable. The ideal of masculine dominance simply does not map onto lived experience, or as Ducat puts it, “Real men, sad to say, come up short” (2). By this
logic, a greater attempt to perform phallic masculinity suggests a greater anxiety. Sim constructs Cerebus as the anxious aardvark who constantly feels the need to defend his masculinity, and in so doing he critiques phallic masculinity as the source of that anxiety.

In the very first *Cerebus* story, well before Sim conceived the 300-issue epic that it would become, the author introduces Cerebus as a character who must constantly answer challenges to his masculinity. As Cerebus enters the local tavern, the narrator exclaims, “The tavern! Where a man (or aardvark) is measured by his ability to reach the bar unscathed (Sim 1987a, 10). When a mischievous thug grabs Cerebus’ tail, the aardvark hacks off the offending hand. When refused service, he points his bloodied sword in the bartender’s face. The bartender changes his mind (11). In these first few pages, Sim implies that Cerebus’ small stature contributes to both the frequency with which his masculinity is challenged and the dramatic fashion in which he meets such challenges. As Cerebus rides into town, the narrator explains why the aardvark was such a curiosity: “You see, he stood only five hands high, had a lengthy snout, a long tail, and was covered with short grey fur” (9). Every descriptor in this sentence refers to height or length: “high,” “lengthy,” “long,” and “short.” The narrator follows by saying, “He was, in short… Cerebus the Aardvark” (9). The speaker then notes that men are “measured” as Cerebus enters the tavern, and every character that interacts with him must kneel or severely bend his head. The greatest feminizing threat to someone’s masculinity is internal (Ducat 1), so the text’s emphasis on Cerebus’ height indicates that his small stature is his greatest insecurity. It is not clear whether or not Cerebus’ height causes the man in the tavern to challenge him. Because the text has emphasized Cerebus’ stature, what is apparent is that the aardvark feels anxious about the incongruity between his size
and the expectations of phallic masculinity. Not surprisingly, Cerebus answers challenges with his sword, an obviously phallic object. The only frame in the tavern that shows a character talking to Cerebus while standing up straight comes when Cerebus points his sword in the barkeep’s face (see figure 8). The sword acts as quite literal evidence of the aardvark’s phallic power. From the beginning, Cerebus is a character that wants to dominate everyone around him in order to neutralize any threat to his masculinity.

Cerebus sustains his drive for power throughout the vast majority of the series. Sim builds the plot around Cerebus’ various conquests, each of greater significance than the last. As a mercenary in volume one, Cerebus cuts down anyone who stands in his way (or happens to mock his height). In High Society, he becomes prime minister of Iest and immediately invades a neighboring country. As the pope in both volumes of Church and State, he enjoys pushing the boundaries of what people will do just because he says so. For instance, he announces that those who fail to bring him all of their gold will be damned, and he later tells a compliant crowd that “Anyone who moves before Most Holy comes back out will spend the rest of eternity sipping lava through an iron straw” (Sim 1988, 752). In these early stories, Cerebus acts only out of self-interest and his actions cause suffering for others. Later, it becomes clear that Cerebus is a particularly anxious individual.

The best example of Cerebus as the anxious male comes when he confronts Cirin during his second ascension in Minds (the tenth volume). Sharing a small bit of concrete with a throne, the two have ascended together into space as messiahs acting on behalf of their respective deities—the god, Tarim, and the goddess, Terim. As Cirin taunts her
Figure 8: Cerebus neutralizes threats to his masculinity with his trusty sword (Sim 1987a, 11).
male counterpart, Cerebus calls upon his god: “O Merciless Tarim! Warrior King of Kings, Strike! Strike now. Unleash Your Power, Crush Your ancient foe! (Sim 1996, 28-29). After twelve panels of waiting, nothing happens to Cirin. Instead, she cries, “Behold!” and suddenly the two aardvarks are surrounded by meteors. Cirin describes the meteors as “The Sea of Sadness,” the “Final resting place for those whose hearts had turned from the love of our Lady… Worshippers of male deities, fornicators, rebellious daughters, mystics, practitioners of contraception… Rapists. Murderers” (34). Cirin implores Cerebus to take his last chance to turn from his wicked ways and worship Terim. In this moment, Sim provides a visible sign for Cerebus’ anxiety. Aside from his wide eyes, Cerebus’ left hand lies at his crotch at such an angle that it resembles a penis at rest (see figure 9). This moment speaks to the reality of being a male and the vulnerability it entails. Despite Cerebus’ theatrical phallicism, the text attaches a visible penis to him to communicate the reality that men are in fact delicate. The text plays out as a castration fantasy. A powerful woman renegotiates the social hierarchy and places herself at the top. Cirin functions in this instance as a pure feminizing threat that demands a response from Cerebus.

What is especially poignant about this moment is Cerebus’ response to this feminizing threat. Having been told to bow down and recognize that God is a woman, Cerebus again calls upon Tarim to unleash his power, at which point a light comes from his body and slowly takes the shape of a gigantic stone phallus (see figure 10). Sim reifies the notion of using a phallus to fend off emasculation. Fittingly, the phallus turns out to be an optical illusion, and it passes right through Cirin, suggesting that phallic
Figure 9: Cerebus’ vulnerability is exposed by Cirin (Sim 1996, 36).
Figure 10: Cirin looks on as the giant stone phallus approaches (Sim 1996, 41).
masculinity is illusory, that it does not correspond to the lived experience of real men. This reality is the source of the anxious masculinity.

*Cerebus* undermines the relationship between reality and the narrative of masculine conquest in a number of ways, but one of the most foundational ways is how Sim draws Cerebus. As Grace has noted, Cerebus “is made up almost entirely of curved and rounded lines, and his ears, his only other prominent physical feature, are vaginal rather than phallic” (4). Grace also asserts that Cerebus’ snout is clearly phallic, but his snout in fact resembles a flaccid penis, especially at certain angles, whereas a phallus is eternally erect. His head is a continual reminder of the delicate position of the male. Furthermore, Sim draws Cerebus with no pants, yet also no penis. Prior to interacting with exterior forces, Cerebus is emasculated. The feminine features that Sim includes in Cerebus’ body preclude Cerebus from actually fitting the template of the masculine conqueror.

The most discussed feminine feature in Cerebus’ body is in fact one that Sim never draws—his vagina. The simultaneous presence of a penis and a vagina does not, as Villareal and Grace suggest, necessarily mean that gender is socially constructed. More precisely, Cerebus’ discovery that he is a hermaphrodite functions as yet one more challenge to the masculinity he so nervously protects. Significantly, Cerebus is holding a sword—his most dependable phallic object—when Astoria delivers the news. The result of hearing this news is that Cerebus relies more heavily on his sword, which he presses to Cirin’s belly with greater force (Sim 1995, 99). He remains an anxious male, albeit much more anxious. Like the other feminine characteristics of Cerebus’ body, his vagina suggests that his ideology of masculinity does not match his experience.
Because the greatest threat to a man’s masculinity is always internal, Cerebus’ anxiety reaches its highest level when he is alone. In *Minds*, shortly after Cerebus’ confrontation with Cirin, he is left alone, floating in space on a block of concrete. He begins to pray to Tarim, but he repeatedly interrupts himself: “Praise Tarim. Praise Tarim. Praise Tarim for not minding that Cerebus is a faggot! Astoria said Cerebus has a penis and an angina and that makes Cerebus a faggot!” (Sim 1996, 114). Cerebus now has at least two voices in his head. Sim suggests the split in the aardvark’s personality by laying the words of one voice over the other, creating the feeling of simultaneity. Rising to the challenge Cerebus has presented himself, he prays, “Please, Tarim. Cerebus isn’t a faggot. Cerebus hates faggots” (114). Not only does he deny being gay, but he places himself in a position of dominance in relation to gay men. Furthermore, he insists that he hates gay men, implying that he will take action against those who do not fit his understanding of masculinity. In order to teach Cerebus a lesson about dominance and gender, Dave Sim breaks into the aardvark’s world as a character: “Dave.”

Dave’s actions constitute both an attack on phallic masculinity and a form of therapy designed to treat it. After discussing Cerebus’ failings and the ways in which he destroys people’s lives (especially women), Dave decides to operate on Cerebus to remove a swollen red bump and invoke the “injury-to-eye motif” (Sim 1996, 241). The operation is perhaps the greatest threat to Cerebus’ brittle masculine psyche. It positions him as the receiver of two different phalluses—the scalpel and the syringe. Sim draws the syringe with fluid dripping down the needle (see figure 11), and he describes the operation in sexual terms, emphasizing to Cerebus and the reader that the needle “must
Figure 11: Dave explains how he will use the syringe to “**pierce the soft flesh** of the underlid”

(Sim 1996, 244).
first *pierce* the *soft flesh* of the underlid” (244). Dave symbolically rapes Cerebus in order create empathy for his victims.

By placing Cerebus in the feminine position, Dave emasculates Cerebus, and this is a challenge that Cerebus cannot face with a sword. Furthermore, Dave intentionally cultivates anxiety in Cerebus: "This sudden switch, on my part, from yelling to a dispassionate and reasoned tone—far from reassuring you—is feeding your anxiety, as well it should" (240). Sim highlights the intensity of the moment with a series of close-ups on the aardvark's strained eye. surrounded by sweat on all sides (see figure 12). Sim makes his point clearer when he switches to close-ups of Cerebus' mouth. Separated from the rest of the face, his mouth resembles a vagina. With a vagina now metonymically representing Cerebus, his castration is complete. This works as therapy, however, because Dave builds the anxiety to a fever pitch, only to resolve it by revealing that Cerebus had no reason to be anxious: "See? I didn't lie to you. There's no more pain in getting your hair cut" (247-248). In this way, *Cerebus* suggests that the anxiety that undergirds phallic masculinity has no basis in reality. It follows that that the narrative of masculine conquest—as a product of phallic masculinity—is harmful for not only its victims, but for the males who attempt to enact it.
The Revelation of Divine Masculinity

If *Cerebus* devotes so much time and space to exposing the destruction entailed by the narrative of masculine conquest, one must ask if the text offers an alternative model of masculinity. One could argue that *Cerebus* deconstructs the very idea of gender, but to do so one must ignore one very important part of the story: the revelation Cerebus receives in *The Last Day* from an apparently divine source. With this revelation, *Cerebus* privileges an essentialist concept of gender that is hierarchical, though devoid of any call for conquest or dominance.

By the end of *Minds*—the tenth volume—the anxious masculinity linked to the warrior god, Tarim, has been thoroughly subverted, yet Cerebus's revelation in the final volume of the series reconfigures the notion of God in totally gendered terms. Sim reinvents the creation myth of Genesis 1-2 so that God Himself had very little to do with the creation. Rather, "In the beginning God brought forth from within Himself His spirit" (Sim 2004, 2). The spirit, wanting to be equal with God, created the light. The light—being in fact inferior to God and spirit—also wanted equality, so God's spirit joined with the light, which ultimately resulted in the creation of the world. The story is a bit complicated, but these details are sufficient to show Sim's argument. He explains in his footnotes that "although man-as-a-total-being was made in God's image, man's penis was
Figure 12: Cerebus' swollen eyes communicate his anxiety (Sim 1996, 245).
made in the image of God's *spirit.*" Women are the feminine light. Such a construction, even in such basic form, has several implications. The first is obvious: *Cerebus* privileges the idea that there is an authentic masculinity to which men can adhere by following God's example. Second, masculinity is superior to femininity (the feminine light is twice-removed from God). Third, because the penis is what Sim calls a "living metaphor" for God's spirit, phallic conquest is out of the question for authentic masculinity. In other words, although this construction places masculine subjects at the top of the social hierarchy, it also advises them against actually *doing* anything to maintain that position. The spirit's chief mistake was entering into the feminine light and multiplying. It follows that multiplying is an act of rebellion against God. Thus, the phallus, as an image of infinite virility, comes to represent everything that is wrong with the male, explaining why *Cerebus* often conflates violence and sex (Grace n.d., 4). To enact a narrative of conquest would be to participate in the rebellion against God. To the contrary, if men are to bear the image of God, they must recognize that God gave His spirit and the light free will. Despite their rebellion, he does not actively oppose their goals. In fact, God provides the earth with water and "tender grass" (Sim 2004, 24) in order to sustain the spirits that inhabit it until they decide to repent. He allows the light to do as she pleases. Sim's creation myth implies that one who takes on authentic masculinity will remove oneself from the battle for dominance, allowing others to self-determine. *Cerebus* calls upon its readers to abandon phallic masculinity in favor of the masculinity modeled by God—a divine masculinity.

A final implication of this creation story is that both men and women can participate in masculinity. Because Sim constructs gender in terms of mirroring God
(divine masculinity), His spirit (phallic masculinity), or the light (femininity), gender roles are linked to the absolute, yet not necessarily to the biological. Instead, gender is a position in a divine grammar. Sim may place masculinity above femininity, but divine masculinity in Cerebus consists of celibacy, devotion to God, and abandoning attempts to dominate others. Nothing in the text precludes women from inhabiting this role. In fact, the two characters who most closely resemble this model of masculinity are Astoria and Suentius Po in Reads. Both sexes are represented. Po's advocacy of non-intervention foreshadows the creation story that would come over one hundred issues later: "Reality mocks all attempts to control it. And mocks, as well, the would-be controller. The message is implicit. The only person you can control is yourself. To attempt to control anyone or anything else is to don the vestments of the fool" (Sim 1995, 81). For Po, the greatest act is to remove oneself from the battle for control. Po even sees engaging the conflict to the extent that he does as a failure:

   I have succumbed to many temptations. Deploiring would-be messiahs, I have adopted the tone of arrogant self-righteousness which characterizes them. I have lost my temper for the first time in many years. I have insulted and deprecated most of your strongly-held beliefs. Already. Already I can feel my sense of connectedness—my peace of mind—falling away from me (84).

Po embodies authentic masculinity not only in his dedication to self-determination, but also in his connection to the divine. While he never expressly mentions devotion to God, Sim imparts to Po a spiritual calm. In addition to Po's "sense of connectedness" and "peace of mind," Sim frames the panels on this page around Po's barely-open left eye, conveying a sense of tranquility, as well as appealing to the notion that the eyes are the
window to the soul. As a holy man who eschews power, Po fits Sim's model for authentic masculinity.

By following Po's example, Astoria fits Sim's model as well, suggesting that women can successfully adopt authentic masculinity. As she admits that "power over others is an illusion," she stresses that she seduced various people because she "wanted to destroy Cirin" (Sim 1995, 99). By juxtaposing seduction and destruction, Sim conflates sex with domination. Before this moment of enlightenment, Astoria embodied the feminine light, who accomplished her goals by seducing God's spirit and multiplying. In the same way, Astoria confesses, "I was at my most fertile when I provoked you [Cerebus] into 'raping' me" (98). She reveals that both she and Cirin want to gain power by creating a "race of aardvarks." Their struggle is one of domination and multiplication. Astoria's decision to remove herself from the conflict represents a commitment to forsake power and sex, instead determining to live a life of solitude modeled after Po's example. *Cerebus* may privilege the idea that gender is linked to the divine, and it may privilege masculinity, but it still allows women to participate in masculinity.
How Cerebus Undermines Its Own Authority

While *Cerebus* suggests that masculinity has its basis in the divine, the text undermines its own epistemic authority. Sim has written that "The definition of schizophrenia—the inability to perceive the difference between reality and fantasy—is, to me, self-evidently ludicrous because it presupposes that there is universally agreed upon perception of what reality is" (Sim 2007). The series repeatedly attacks the idea of consensus reality. The text offers its version of reality as a possibility, rather than imposing itself upon the reader as absolute truth. *Cerebus* undercuts its own authority on the subject of masculinity through its narration, through its critique of religion, and by situating its claims in the subjectivity of a mentally unstable aardvark in a work of fiction.

*Cerebus* weakens its own epistemic authority by avoiding in its narration—especially in *Latter Days*—what some critics have called "immasculation." According to Alice Ferrebe (2005), textual immasculation is the attempt by a masculine text to create in the reader a sense of belonging. Further, a masculine text "tells its story for masculine ends, to consolidate a community founded upon masculine principles of identity, and to console a gender anxious about its stability" (14). Obviously, *Cerebus* does not fit the definition of masculine text as described by Ferrebe. She concerns herself here with phallic masculinity and its attendant anxieties, and *Cerebus* exposes such anxieties as
problematic; Sim’s text argues that phallic masculinity is not a viable model.
Nonetheless, Sim's text does argue for a certain conception of gender, and the most
important aspect of immasculcation is the imposition of a certain gender ideology. To
immasculate is to inscribe ideology in the reader by presuming that he or she shares the
same assumptions or values as the text.

In *Latter Days*, one of the few books in the series that has a narrator, Sim avoids
immasculcation by having Cerebus address his reader as someone outside his
interpretative community. Throughout the course of telling his story, Cerebus often
interjects various comments that indicate that he views his listener (the reader) as an
other. As he describes his time as a shepherd early in the book, he apologizes: "Sorry.
Cerebus gets a little carried away talking about sheep" (Sim 2001c, 10). Later, as Cerebus
relates how he gained rabbi superpowers, he says, "Cerebus just knows you're going to
think that this next part was a dream but Cerebus swears to you that Cerebus was awake
the whole time" (114), and when he finishes relating his rabbi origin story he says, "You
don't believe Cerebus. No, no... that's okay. If it hadn't happened to Cerebus... heh-heh,
Cerebus wouldn't believe it either" (121). Cerebus consistently draws attention to his
listener's incredulity, thus constructing the reader as one who reads *Cerebus* with
skepticism. Sim reveals at the end of the book that Cerebus' listener is a woman who
resembles Jaka. In this volume, then, the reader is feminized. Cerebus' narration
performs the exact opposite operation as immasculcation. By positioning his reader as an
other, Sim encourages critical engagement with his work, rather than naive acceptance.
The reader is well-situated to question *Cerebus'* validity as a source of knowledge. Even
if *Cerebus* did argue for a gender essentialism linked to biology, the text presents its argument as a possibility for the reader to consider, not a certainty.

If Sim positions his readers to be skeptical of his theory of gender, he gives them quite a bit to be skeptical about by locating the divine revelation that undergirds his theory in the subjectivity of Cerebus. Sim's reconfigured creation myth comes to Cerebus in a dream in the beginning of *The Last Day*, and there is nothing that indicates that this dream is from God any more than any of the other dreams and visions the aardvark has had during the series' run. For example, Cerebus sees a giant dragon in one of the very early stories, and that dragon turns out to be an illusion created by a sorcerer (Sim 1987a, 24). In the second volume, *High Society*, the aardvark regularly interacts with an elf that only he can see. In *Church and State: Volume 1*, Cerebus sees multiple visions, one of which involves the specter of his mother telling him to put on a hat to hide his ears (Sim 1987b, 516). In *Church and State: Volume II*, Cerebus has a vision in which he becomes a woman passing judgment on Suentius Po (Sim 1988, 968-973). In short, Cerebus has a lot of visions. The text offers no reason to think that Cerebus' creation myth is actually a vision from God, except that Cerebus himself firmly believes that to be the case. The sheer volume of visions in *Cerebus* damages the reliability of the allegedly divine revelation of *The Last Day*.

Not only does Cerebus see numerous visions, but some of those visions (along with other oddities in the aardvark's psychological profile) suggest that Cerebus is mentally unbalanced, perhaps even schizophrenic. Cerebus talks to multiple voices in his head for the duration of the series, and he has at least three severe mental break-downs (see figure 13), yet the standout for Cerebus in terms of displaying mental instability is
Figure 13: Cerebus “cracks up” for the third time in the series (Sim 2001c, 279).
when he believes he has become a superhero named "Rabbi." Cerebus explains to his reader in *Latter Days* that his favorite comic book superhero was actually his secret identity all along. He has "Rabbi-speed," "Rabbi-strength" (Sim 2001c, 115), and even detachable fake foreskin (116). It becomes clear fairly quickly, however, that despite Cerebus' strong belief to the contrary, he does not have superpowers. As he prepares to do battle with the Cirinists twenty pages later, he attempts to detach his foreskin (with obviously amusing results) and tries to use his Rabbi-flight, only to fall down a flight of concrete stairs into a dark basement where he waits for his followers to rescue him (143-146). If Cerebus is capable of such delusions of grandeur, the text equally allows for the possibility that Cerebus' dream of the creation myth is merely another sign of madness, and thus Sim allows for the possibility that his construction of gender could simply be the product of insanity.

Even if Cerebus were perfectly sane, the fact that his subjectivity is the means by which the reader experiences the divine revelation still challenges the reliability of the dream because Cerebus never actually abandons his phallic masculinity in favor of the new vision of gender entailed by the revelation. Despite the warnings Cerebus has received from Suentius Po and Dave, the aardvark's controlling tendencies only grow over time as he gains more power in *Latter Days*. After seizing power, Cerebus' first act is to don an outlandish costume—which includes an enormous phallus (see figure 14)—and create the persona of "Spore, King of All Demons." At first, he creates the persona to gain power over a rival, but he soon uses the costume to purge the land of "Devils, vipers, and scorpions," or in other words, unruly women. In every town he visits, the men vote on every woman in town, determining whether she is "a devil or a viper or a
Figure 14: Cerebus in his “Spore” costume. Note the enormous phallus (Sim 2001c, 230).
scorpion." If a majority agrees, they execute the woman in question (Sim 2001c, 224-225). Cerebus is a phallic despot.

Cerebus' failure to live in accordance with the model of masculinity laid out by his dream is best illustrated by the last moments of his life and the last moments of the series. Having heard his son's plans to create a race of gods via genetic engineering, Cerebus picks up his sword and announces, "By gum! Cerebus is going to kill him!" (Sim 2004, 220). Instead of allowing his son to make his own decisions, Cerebus again relies on phallic masculinity to regulate the behavior of others. Instead of beginning another triumphant conquest, however, Cerebus falls off of his bed and crashes to his death (224). In spite of Sim's thorough and consistent disparagement of masculine domination in the series, Cerebus spends his last moments with a phallus in his hand.

Cerebus' failure to live in accordance with his divine revelation is confirmed by the very end of the text, which details the first moments of Cerebus' afterlife. Having died, Cerebus' spirit leaves his body. A light opens up the heavens, and the aardvark sees his old friends, enemies, and acquaintances in the sky, calling for him to join them (see figure 15). The text sets three characters apart from the rest, however: Jaka, Bear (Cerebus' old mercenary buddy), and Ham Ernestway (Sim's stand-in for Ernest Hemingway). Seeing these three, Cerebus changes into his Rabbi identity, removes his pseudo-foreskin, and flies to them. As he does so, he realizes that Rick (a prophet of sorts for Cerebus) is not among the group, and two ghoulish arms reach for the aardvark. He turns to flee, but without success, even as he screams, "Help, God! The light has got Cerebus! God!" (238). Cerebus' fate is unknown, but the ghoulish arms suggest something unpleasant. By highlighting Jaka, Bear, and Ham, the text suggests that those
Figure 15: The patriarchal trio—Ham Ernestway, Jaka, and Bear—greet Cerebus after his death (Sim 2004, 234).
characters in some way represent Cerebus' shortcoming. It is not even apparent that Jaka, Bear, and Ham are even actually there. What is apparent is that Cerebus still admires them and the failed narratives they represent. Jaka, for instance, represents sexual gratification and the domination that comes with it. Bear and Ham are with Jaka here because, as Sim says in his notes, "the top two places in Cerebus' masculine pantheon belong" to them (261). They represent the fact that Cerebus remains bound to anxious masculinity.

Hemingway's presence at the end is especially appropriate since he very specifically invokes the idea of the anxious male. Hemingway critics often argue that his theatrically tough masculinity—which they find in both his writing and his life—was evidence of deep-seated anxiety. Scenes of bravado "evidence what Hemingway would have liked to be secure about, but clearly was not" (Strychacz 2003, 5). Sim's Ernestway in Form and Void mirrors the critical discussion on Hemingway. Ernestway is phallic exemplar. He loves strong drink, boxing, and hunting. He gropes young women like Jaka (Sim 2001b, 456). He is known to say things like, "You do that again? And I beat the living SHIT out of you" (476) In long campfire discussions, however, his wife—Mary—reveals to Cerebus that Ham enjoys being sodomized and will occasionally dress up as a girl for her (523). This revelation implies that Ernestway's public masculinity is a theatrical facade designed to hide his feminine impulses. If Cerebus still idolizes Ernestway, then it follows that he still sees phallic aggression as the pinnacle of masculine existence. Despite receiving a divine revelation that reworks gender, Cerebus has failed to move beyond his traditional framework, and so he falls prey to the light at the conclusion of the series (see figure 16). Cerebus' failure further destabilizes the
Figure 16: Cerebus is dragged away by what he presumes to be the light in the final page of the series (Sim 2004, 239).
reliability of the vision for two reasons. First, not even Cerebus himself seems to believe his vision. If even the character who experienced the vision firsthand mistrusts it as a source of truth, then the reader—who is one step removed from the vision—has good reason to be skeptical. On the other hand, Cerebus may simply misunderstand the vision, which would diminish the very idea of producing a "valid" reading.

If gender in Cerebus is a position in a divine grammar, then readers must reassess their response to Sim’s work. When Cerebus says, “If the vote is a tie, the woman shall die,” we should not read it as Sim playing out a personal fantasy in which he executes women. To the contrary, this scene establishes Cerebus’ failure to give up the narrative of masculine conquest. Readers must forsake the naïve practice of perceiving the portrayal of violence as inherently misogynistic when the author is male. Art often exposes the ugliness of the world, and there is a lot of ugly in Cerebus. Hopefully, fans of Sim’s work can reshape the debate on Cerebus to be about its ideas, rather than their preconceptions of what the text says.
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