# The Harley-fication of Jinx

## Re-Visualising the Madwoman Trope in Media

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and transformation of the *madwoman trope* in contemporary media through a comparative analysis of Harley Quinn and Jinx from *Arcane*. It interrogates how gendered madness is constructed, aestheticized, and subverted across different texts. The article asks: *To what extent does the character of Jinx expand, critique, or liberate herself from the Harley Quinn archetype of the 'madwoman' in popular culture?* Using feminist media theory and character analysis, this study traces how both figures embody chaotic femininity shaped by trauma, manipulation, and resistance. While Harley Quinn popularized a glamorized, hypersexualized version of the trope, Jinx's portrayal in *Arcane* recontextualizes madness through emotional depth, visual storytelling, and psychological fragmentation. This shift reflects a broader movement toward more nuanced representations of female instability—not as spectacle, but as survival. Ultimately, the paper argues that Jinx revisualizes the madwoman trope in a way that balances vulnerability with power, offering a counter-narrative to traditional portrayals shaped by the male gaze and cultural fetishization.

Keywords: Madwoman Trope, Visual Symbolism, Feminist Media Critique, Trauma and Identity, Character Archetypes

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## Narrating Madness: Tropes, Archetypes, and Media Perception

What makes a female character compelling—and can she remain compelling if her agency is fractured or performative? Scholars such as Melissa Sievers (*Brains, Brawn and Breasts: How Women Are Depicted In Today's Action/adventure Comic Books,* 2003*)* and Sani Satya Pratiwi *(Women's Portrayals in the Comic Books*, 2013) have asked this question in the context of how women are portrayed in pop culture, particularly in comics and animation. There has been a tendency to place women into binaries in terms of their personality and actions in fictional representations; one prime example being "bold or mentally unstable women (like Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847)) [that] are typecast as 'madwomen', as opposed to what would be considered well-behaved and sane" (Weytingh 12). To gain a more nuanced understanding of the role of fictional female characters and their transgressive archetypes—universal and timeless storytelling models rooted in mythology and psychology, as Puglisi explains—it is essential to analyse how such figures, particularly those associated with the madwoman trope, engage with, subvert, or reinforce dominant narratives of femininity, pathology, and deviance within cultural and literary discourses. These tropes, shaped by genre and cultural trends, are context-bound conventions that reflect and reproduce evolving social norms. First while archetypes can appear across history and culture, tropes like the 'femme fatale' or the 'madwoman' are recurring figures tied to specific representational traditions. According to Eder, these character constructions involve both "the prototypical constellation of traits within the fictional world" and "typical aesthetic representation" (Eder 38f). Second, tropes function not only as narrative shorthand but also as "ideological frameworks through which gendered behaviours are rendered legible, especially when it comes to pathologized femininity", as suggested by a study called *Analyzing Gender Bias within Narrative Tropes* (Mani). They provide a lens for tracing how certain character types are reiterated, reimagined, or resisted across media.

This article explores the evolution of the 'madwoman' trope, particularly in its modern, stylized forms, opposed to earlier portrayals that emphasized realism or depicted female madness as a purely tragic or threatening condition. I argue that the character of Jinx from *Arcane* (*Arcane* (Linke, Yee 2021, 2024)) re-visualizes and expands this trope by building on—and ultimately diverging from—the model established by Harley Quinn. Through a close reading of visual symbolism, narrative development, and character aesthetics, I ask: How does the design and storytelling in *Arcane* contribute to the 'Harleyfication' of Jinx? And to what extent does her characterization offer a critique of the glamorized, hyper-feminized 'madwoman' popularized by Harley Quinn?

While this article positions Harley Quinn as a foundational figure in the contemporary portrayal of the madwoman trope, it does not seek to suggest that she represents a negative or reductive model. On the contrary, Harley's multiple incarnations across comics, animation, and film underscore her narrative fluidity and psychological complexity. Yet it is precisely because of her widespread popularity and the aesthetic consistency across these representations that she has come to define a cultural standard for how clinically 'insane' women are visualized and understood

in media. Her influence has shaped both the creative choices behind similar characters and the audience's expectations of them. As such, Harley Quinn functions not only as a compelling character in her own right, but also as a benchmark against which subsequent madwomen—such as Jinx in *Arcane*—are constructed, contested, and reimagined.

## Tracing the Madwoman Trope

How to define the madwoman? There's hardly an absolute blueprint to stick to, as the trope has developed into a complex set of figures over the years and continues to evolve. But if only word composition is considered, it is a woman who is insane, crazy, mentally unbalanced or deranged, subject to delusions or hallucination (in later use esp.) psychotic (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Or is she? While the term suggests a woman suffering from mental illness, its literary and cultural function is far more complex, as these terms imply a variety of meanings depending on language, culture, social norms and beliefs.

But even more interesting is the question of what or who makes her 'mad', and to what extent can we still speak of mad women today? Historically, this trope has roots in patriarchal systems that have long pathologized female emotion, independence, or non-conformity as madness. Thus, the madwoman is constructed as a figure who deviates from socially sanctioned norms of femininity—an aberrant woman marked by her refusal or inability to conform to prescribed roles and expectations. Mau identifies two different types of 'mad' women: the insane woman and the angry woman. A rupture within her psyche renders her unable to maintain the performance of socially acceptable behaviour; she becomes framed as broken, deviant, and defective (Mau 9). Such 'madwomen' are often portrayed as threats to social order—figures to be confined, silenced, or erased. However, their status as literary and fictional characters opens them to reinterpretation. Particularly in the postmodern period, these figures have increasingly been read through a feminist lens, revealing the ideological forces that shape their representation (9).

A second dimension of the 'madwoman trope' centres on emotional volatility—specifically, the expression of anger. This iteration is often exemplified by a woman who loses composure and exhibits a public outburst of rage. Within dominant Western cultural frameworks, such displays are frequently dismissed as irrational, immature, or unprofessional, regardless of the legitimacy of the provocation (Mau). Her anger is thus pathologized, reinforcing the association between femininity, emotional excess, and instability.

Feminist literary theorists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have offered influential critiques of this trope. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they argue that the boundaries of sanity are not neutral or objective but rather constructed and upheld by patriarchal structures of power—structures that have historically reinforced woman's position as 'Other' and cemented her secondary status in relation to the male norm (Gilbert, Gubar 194). As mentioned earlier, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* poses an example for the *madwoman in the attic*, who serves as both a literal and symbolic threat to the domestic order. Her novel plays upon the confrontation with Rochester's mad wife Bertha and thus "with her own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion, and rage,' a

secret dialogue of self and soul" (GG 339). They argue that the madwoman (Bertha Rochester, among many others) serves as a mirror and a projection of the heroine's desires (409) that are suppressed by the patriarchal power structures and ignorance. Within this framework, madness becomes a coded language through which women express what patriarchal discourse renders inexpressible.

The change in the representation of the madwoman trope has undergone since then is significant—from the passive, tragic victim of patriarchal narratives to an active, chaotic, and sometimes empowered figure. Modern media often subverts the trope by showing that what is perceived as madness is actually a response to trauma, repression, or systemic violence (Haralu 3ff.). In this way, madness becomes a metaphor for resistance. These narratives may not 'cure' the woman, but instead validate her perspective, exploring her subjectivity rather than dismissing it. At the same time, some stories reclaim the chaos associated with the trope (62). They present it not just as a symptom of suffering, but as a form of freedom or self-definition—flawed, messy, but powerful. By doing so, these portrayals reject the old idea that women must be palatable, sane, or rational to deserve space in a narrative. Rather than a simple antagonist, the madwoman becomes a site of critique—a symbol of what happens when patriarchal norms suppress female agency.

At the same time, it is difficult to overlook the cathartic appeal of the madwoman trope—its potential to channel repressed emotions and fantasies of resistance. Yet, even in its most stylized or romanticized forms such as the fan adoration surrounding figures like Harley Quinn, this trope often perpetuates the objectification of the madwoman as a transgressive spectacle rather than a subject with agency. Thus, the subsequent sections will illustrate this shift through close engagement with Harley Quinn and Jinx, whose respective portrayals exemplify both the aesthetic allure and ideological implications of the modern madwoman.

## Perceiving mad women: The Gaze, the Body, the Trope

How we define female characters depends on how we perceive them. Traditional portrayals of the 'strong female character' have been critiqued for their superficial empowerment, often designed more for the male gaze than for genuine complexity or autonomy (Brown 44). The male gaze, as established by Mulvey, refers to the way visual arts depict women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective, often objectifying them (Mulvey). Especially with the rise of noir film, representations have shifted: The madwoman and the femme fatale are both tropes that destabilize male-dominated narratives. The femme fatale wields power through seduction and manipulation; her danger lies in her agency. The madwoman, by contrast, is often perceived as dangerous precisely because she lacks control—over her body, her emotions, or her mind.

Instead of being damsels in distress waiting for a man to save them, female characters have become as powerful, violent, skilled, smart, and self-assured as any of the male counterparts. The femme fatale "is able to take matters into her own hands and succeed" (Barba 39). But, as Brown notes, while this may be a positive development, it is often offset "by the compensatory exaggerated feminine form, resulting in an odd combination of toughness and sexiness" (Brown 55).

It is important to recognize that most of those female characters are presented as dangerous not just because they are capable of defending themselves or fighting in general but because they are alluring (Brown 57), making them dangerous in a way a male character can never be. They pose a threat not only because they "clearly embody a simplistic form of castration anxiety" (Brown 57) but because they stand in the way of a male-contrived view of women as an irrational force (Haralu 6). But what if the female character is both – a "spirited thrill-seeking fatale, who wreaks havoc on her surroundings" (Barba 31)? Contemporary media often blends these figures, producing hybrid characters who possess both the erotic power of the femme fatale and the emotional volatility of the madwoman. But as Brown notes, even empowered female characters are often compensated with exaggerated femininity, creating an "odd combination of toughness and sexiness" (Brown 55) that reinscribes gender norms. Crucially, this binary of worship or fear, love or loathing, is shaped by the male gaze, which not only controls the representation of the madwoman's body but extends its power over her actions. As a result, the madwoman becomes an "erotic object" (Mulvey 19), subject to objectification and manipulation.

Though being shaped by the male gaze, the evolution of the madwoman figure offers an interesting case in the shifting landscape of female representation. Harley Quinn, as a contemporary iteration, set a standard for the madwoman trope, blending emotional volatility with eroticized power. Yet, as we will explore, Jinx from *Arcane* diverges from this model, offering a reinterpretation of the madwoman that challenges traditional frameworks of both sexuality and agency. By examining the ways in which Jinx's character design and narrative development subvert the conventions established by Harley Quinn, we can better understand how modern media is reshaping the boundaries of the madwoman trope.

## The 'Harleyfication' of Jinx

With a short outline of the development of the madwoman trope, the question still remains: How did Harley Quinn set a standard for the chaotic, mad or even tragic woman in contemporary media? In characterizing Harley Quinn, it is essential to look at habitual actions, the circumstances of a person and her social relationships and to look for a character trait that motivates the action, the circumstances, or the relationships (Eder 31). In Netflix's *Arcane*, however, Jinx expands this trope by blending aesthetic chaos with a deeply human portrayal of trauma, psychosis, and fractured identity. While Jinx shares thematic similarities with Harley Quinn, her story introduces emotional complexity and narrative depth that push the trope into new territory. The following explores how Harley's many iterations build a composite image of the modern madwoman as both empowered and aestheticized. It interrogates how her chaotic persona has been mythologized through romanticized trauma, exaggerated femininity, and stylized violence.

Following that, I'd like to turn to Netflix's Arcane, where the character Jinx reimagines the trope by fusing visual spectacle with emotional depth. While echoing Harley on surface level, Jinx's narrative foregrounds trauma, sisterhood, and internal fragmentation, pushing the trope beyond glamorized madness toward a more introspective and psychological portrayal. Finally, I want to place the two figures in direct dialogue, asking to what extent Jinx ecpands, critiques, or even libe-

rates herself from the standard Harley helped establish. The comparative approach employed here draws directly on earlier discussions of trope and archetype, using Eder's and Mani's frameworks to decode how Harley Quinn and Jinx construct madness as both narrative strategy and ideological commentary. It also considers how media continues to evolve the madwoman trope—and whether these portrayals empower their characters or simply repackage chaos for aesthetic consumption.

## Harley Quinn: A breakdown

Harley Quinn's character has evolved significantly over time, from her early role as the Joker's playful and mischievous sidekick to a more nuanced, troubled figure grappling with madness, villainy, and a liberated sense of sexuality. This transformation has made her a subject of ongoing debate, analysis, and diverse reactions, with each iteration continuing to captivate audiences and scholars alike (Weytingh 16).

She is "a psychological archetype of a neurotic woman, coming from a dysfunctional family, trying to solve her problems in the wrong way" (Petric 3). In *Harley Quinn: A Quinntessential Crash Course* the author establishes Harley Quinn as a character, who "is resilient and you see this in any media you decide to pick up, marking her unpredictability and charismatic personality" (Vexed). But what are essential elements, that make Harley Quinn her iconic self? What is her recognition value apart from being a catalyst for chaos and how does the image of the madwoman fit in? And how is her madness perceived?

Harley Quinn's essential identity is defined by her transformation from Dr. Harleen Quinzel, a respected psychiatrist, into a chaotic, unpredictable figure—her alter ego marked by both psychological and physical change. Her harlequin costume, an adaptation of the mischievous, often satirical figure from Commedia dell'Arte, symbolizes more than just her madness; though not a mad character, the harlequin connects her to the archetype of the trickster who "exhibits the reckless, manic, and endearing qualities she was coined for" (Kaya). However, unlike the original harlequin, Harley's madness is not just a playful satire of social norms but a deep rebellion against the very structure that once defined her. She is no longer bound by the expectations of her gender or role in society, making her an everywoman with whom we can sympathize, seeing our own flaws and rebellions reflected in her many versions (Roddy).

At her core, Harley Quinn is a woman of contradictions—her personas shift from the loyal, thrill-seeking femme fatale, willing to risk everything for a relationship with the Joker, to a more complex figure who, in later movie iterations such as *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Birds of Prey* (2020), breaks free from his toxic influence. Her evolution embodies a radical departure while at the same time setting a new standard for the madwoman trope by showcasing her ability to control her fate in a world that often seeks to silence her. Yet, in her pursuit of independence, she still navigates a deep-seated identity crisis, as her obsession with defining herself through chaos becomes her anchor (Nav K).

Harley's madness is perceived through this tension: she is both a victim and an agent of chaos. Her transformation is rooted in the Joker's manipulation, yet as her character evolves, her madness becomes a self-inflicted choice. In *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-2017), especially episode 24 *Mad Love* (1999), her devotion to the Joker is portrayed as both a source of pain and the genesis of her identity. In the *Batman comic* (1999) Harley willingly joins the Joker into a life of crime, choosing her own identity as his sidekick. Similar to *Mad Love*, Harley remains fiercely loyal to the Joker despite his betrayals, viewing the world through a distorted lens that skews reality—an aspect seen in her comics and films like *Birds of Prey* and *The Suicide Squad* (Roddy). In the latter there's been a shift from her classic depiction. In the movie, though still in love with the Joker, she does not stick to his side all that much, being "more of a psychopath than usual, grinning as she executed bloody murders and giggling in situations where even her hardened teammates were terrified" (Riesman). Her costume is reimagined with a cropped 'Daddy's Lil Monster' t-shirt, hot pants, fishnets, and pigtails, clearly designed for visual impact, infantilizing her visually as well as her 'irrational, childish behaviour'. Kate Roddy, in her article *Masochist or Machiavel? Reading Harley Quinn in Canon and Fanon*, discusses also how Harley's submissive traits, combined with her newer visualization has been interpreted and reconstructed in various media and by fans, acknowledging "the antifeminist possibilities of the submissive female and masochism's portrayal within [various] discourses" (Roddy). Mani's notion of narrative tropes as ideological frameworks also underlines this concept: Harley's submissiveness and transformation are not just story beats but culturally conditioned representations of how femininity and madness are expected to behave—and to look—on screen.

In other reiterations, Harley's origin is reimagined as an act of coercion, with the Joker forcibly submerging her in chemicals to replicate his own transformation, thereby emphasizing the erasure of her autonomy (Langsdale), symbolically rebirthing her. With focus on her toxic relationship with the Joker, there's been also some feminist approaches to her character who focus on the question, what would it take for Harley Quinn to walk away from the Joker? (Barba 37). *Birds of Prey* showcases that without the Joker shaping her identity, she struggles with a deep-seated identity crisis, which she manages through obsession (Nav K). Harley fixates on what gives her a sense of self. Her obsession becomes her means of defining who she is. However, her madness is not simply destructive; it is also a performance—one that constantly challenges the very frameworks of gender and sanity. As Tara Strand (a Harley Quinn cosplayer) points out, according to Riesman, Harley Quinn became popular because "there weren't a lot of female characters at the time like her—so human and unique and refreshing and weird, and not just sexy" (Riesman). Yet, this very sexualization remains problematic. The tension between Harley's seductive allure and her chaotic, destructive nature underscores a larger issue in how female characters like her are romanticized, objectified and fetishized. Harley's appeal, however, is not just in her appearance or unpredictability, but in her refusal to be confined by the 'ideal' female character who must adhere to moral or social codes. She embodies passion and freedom, while women in media are often forced into a binary of 'toughness and sexiness,' Harley refuses to conform, choosing instead to live on her own terms, often out of pure, unfiltered passion for life (Nav K).

Despite all the complexities mentioned above, Harley Quinn established a new benchmark for the madwoman trope, giving rise to what I would describe as *Harley Quinn-like* characters. However, this transformation is not without its drawbacks. While the *Harley Quinn-like* characters reflect a broader range of female agency and complexity, they also risk perpetuating the romanticization of madness, chaos, and abuse, reducing these figures to symbols of rebellious freedom rather than acknowledging the deeper, often painful consequences of their struggles. In this way, while these characters offer empowering moments, they also blur the line between genuine autonomy and a dangerous, idealized vision of madness, leaving us to wonder if their 'freedom' is ultimately more performative than liberating.

How to move on from those characteristics, then? In the next chapter, it shall be explored how Jinx in *Arcane* expands and redefines the trope further, offering a more complex and multifaceted portrayal that both challenges and reshapes our understanding of madness in contemporary narratives.

## Jinx vs. Harley Quinn: The Making of the Madwoman

Jinx, known from the massive open battle arena (MOBA) game League of Legends (LoL) “that allows characters to choose from 119 champions [170 currently] to fight team matches with anywhere from 5 to 10 players” (Beck) by Riot Games, is a mischievous, clinically insane criminal, and one of the franchise’s first and most iconic champions. In the game, “Jinx is an unhinged criminal intent on causing mayhem with an array of deadly weapons that she wields with glee” (*Jinx/Old Lore*). Every time she is involved in a kill, “because of her sadistic nature and hatred of boredom, […] she ‘gets excited’, which causes her to run faster and possibly exceed her attack speed limit” (*Jinx/Old Lore*). Her violence in the game is thrilling, erratic, and devoid of context. Her character design—skin-tight clothes, exposed midriff, exaggerated expressions—caters, one might argue, to a fantasy of the manic, dangerous, yet desirable woman. This design aligns with a broader trend in gaming where female characters are often sexualized to appeal to a presumed straight male audience. A survey on gender perspectives in LoL highlights this issue, noting that "women are being objectified in the skins and character designs due to the game industry being dominated by the ideologies and perspectives of male developers, artists, and players" (Beck).

Updating some of their characters and rewriting their story for the Netflix Series *Arcane* (Linke, Yee 2021, 2024) was a huge step towards how female characters should be portrayed in media, especially if they fall into the category of certain tropes. Jinx, as portrayed in *Arcane*, represents a significant evolution of the madwoman as established by Harley Quinn. No longer merely a manic spectacle, she is framed through emotional history, trauma, and manipulation, allowing her to expand and critique the trope from within. Like Harley Quinn, she embodies chaos and instability —but her story presents madness not as inherent or aestheticized, but as the product of systemic loss and personal fragmentation.

Jinx, formerly known as Powder, is introduced as a young girl burdened by rejection and grief. After unintentionally causing the deaths of her friends and being labelled a 'jinx' by her sister Vi (episode 1, 3), she experiences a rupture that marks the beginning of her psychological disintegration. Her hallucinations—manifestations of the dead and auditory distortions—visually and narratively underscore her fragmented identity. Her hallucinations, for instance, are depicted through surreal visuals, such as graffiti-like scribbles superimposed over scenes, reflecting her fractured psyche. With her hallucinations becoming increasingly erratic, with rapid shifts between reality and illusion in every episode. Unlike traditional portrayals that render the madwoman as irrational or monstrous from the outset, *Arcane* builds Jinx's psychosis as a gradual, tragic process rooted in trauma and abandonment.

Silco, the primary antagonist and eventual surrogate father, becomes the central force in Jinx's transformation. He fosters dependence by offering emotional validation while simultaneously exploiting her instability. Jinx's erratic violence and unpredictable behaviour increase as her need for love becomes entangled with Silco's ideological extremism. The creation of the 'Jinx' persona—marked by a manic demeanour, erratic energy, and dark humour—is an act of psychological survival and performance, rather than a descent into villainy. In a pivotal scene (episode 9), Jinx confronts her sister with two chairs labelled 'Powder' and 'Jinx', symbolizing her fractured identity and the impossibility of reconciliation. Her choice to kill Silco rather than let him harm Vi illustrates a final rupture—a painful assertion of autonomy within madness.

Furthermore, Jinx's aesthetic reinforces the trope while subverting its implications. Her updated design with the punk-inspired styling, neon-blue hair, and graffiti motifs not only signal rebellion and chaos, but also allows the viewers to focus on and experience her turmoil intimately, fostering empathy rather than objectification and fetishization of the madwoman. This is rooted in narrative necessity rather than spectacle. Her look is performative armour: a visual warning of emotional volatility and a reflection of arrested development. Her performance of chaos is not for the viewer's pleasure, but a disoriented outcry against the impossibility of coherent identity.

The result, then, is a character who challenges the simplistic dichotomy of madness and villainy. Where earlier versions of the madwoman were isolated and punished, Jinx becomes central to the narrative, granted interiority and emotional nuance.

## Jinx and the Expansion of the Madwoman Trope

Both Jinx and Harley Quinn occupy the intersection of madness, trauma, and performance. Their portrayals are shaped not only by personal suffering but also by the influence of dominant male figures who manipulate their identities for strategic ends. In Harley's case, Joker "has lied to and manipulated Harley Quinn into aiding him with deceptive stories about his unfortunate upbringing, designed, in part, to mirror Harley's own difficult childhood" (Barba 35). Similarly, Silco weaponizes Jinx's abandonment issues to construct her into a loyal and violent agent. As Petric notes, "Dr. Quinzel is emotionally unstable and Joker, who is a strong negative character, succeeds to transfer his madness on her" (Petric 3). Silco, though not 'mad' in the sense Joker is, similarly imposes his ideals onto Jinx. Moreover, Jinx's dynamic with Silco often borders on the disturbingly

intimate, suggesting an infantilized dependency rather than overt sexualization. Her gestures—swaying, lap-sitting, teasing—evoke discomfort precisely because they do not conform neatly to either paternal or romantic scripts (episode 4). This ambiguity mirrors Harley's infantilized devotion to Joker, in which emotional regression becomes a survival strategy. Both characters are exploited through affection and made to internalize chaos as identity.

However, Jinx diverges from Harley in narrative function and emotional tone. Harley's madness often carries a performative joy—a clownish glee that masks but never fully erases her emotional damage. Her evolution across media shows fluctuating degrees of autonomy yet remains closely tied to her origin as Joker's companion. Jinx, by contrast, is shaped by compounding traumas: early loss, survivor's guilt, abandonment by Vi, and exploitation by Silco. Her descent into madness is slow, painful, and marked by profound internal conflict.

Both characters are visually constructed through chaotic femininity. Harley's red-and-black palette and jester iconography (excluding *Suicide Squad* and *Birds of Prey*) echo her theatricality, while Jinx's disordered styling and neon palette serve as expressions of volatility and rebellion. They're attractive, but they own this attraction with a sense of agency that the games—as well as in Harleys later portrayals—don't afford (King). These visuals signal instability but also act as shields—outward expressions of inner fragmentation. As narrative devices, their aesthetics maintain the trope's symbolic language while enriching it with psychological depth.

A key parallel emerges in their transformations: Harley is sometimes shown diving willingly into the chemical vat that created the Joker, while in other iterations she is pushed. Jinx's experience with Shimmer (a powerful, addictive purple substance that enhances physical abilities but causes severe physical and mental deterioration) follows a similar arc—first administered non-consensually, then later chosen (episode 8). These mirrored moments invite the question of agency: is madness something imposed, or is it embraced? And can its embrace become a form of resistance? — Tropes such as the madwoman are not neutral containers but ideologically charged lenses (Mani). Harley and Jinx don't merely 'fit' the trope—they expose its internal tensions. Harley performs madness in ways that reinforce and occasionally satirize gender norms, while Jinx fractures it from within, challenging the viewer to empathize rather than consume.

Ultimately, both characters subvert the madwoman trope by reclaiming chaos as a form of autonomy. Their madness is not a spectacle but a weapon, turned inward and outward in response to systemic control. Their narratives do not simply depict madness—they interrogate its construction, its consequences, and its potential as a means of survival. While Harley loses herself to toxic love, Jinx loses herself to grief and fractured identity. Yet both become agents of their own stories, defying the boundaries that once defined them.

## Conclusion: Beyond the Madwoman Trope

Ultimately, the character of Jinx, as developed in *Arcane*, demonstrates a significant shift in the portrayal of the madwoman trope. Her narrative resists reductive representations of female madness by embedding instability in personal history, emotional fragmentation, and the long-term

effects of trauma. In contrast to earlier portrayals that treated madness as a static or aesthetic condition, Jinx's story foregrounds psychological realism and emotional depth. Her madness is not innate, but formed—molded by betrayal, guilt, and manipulation.

The 'Harleyfication' of Jinx—her adoption of visual chaos, unpredictability, and explosive behaviour—signals not a flattening of her character but a transformation of the trope itself. Where Harley's instability often veers into caricature, Jinx's narrative roots her madness in tragedy, creating a portrait of a broken but powerful young woman. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary media: the emergence of female characters who are damaged but not defeated, mad but not powerless. These figures resonate with audiences precisely because they offer complex, messy, and emotionally honest depictions of survival.

Critically, *Arcane* rejects the overt sexualization that has shaped other depictions of the madwoman—most notably Harley Quinn, whose costume evolution from her full-body jester suit to hyper-sexualized outfits in *Suicide Squad*. This aesthetic shift invites the male gaze, turning madness into a fetish rather than a subject of inquiry. Though starting off as an equally sexualized persona in her first appearances in *League of Legends*, in *Arcane* the focus on Jinx shifts. Her appearance is stylized but never objectified, and the cinematography focuses on her emotional landscape rather than her body. *Arcane* reframes madness not as a spectacle for consumption, but as a lens through which to understand trauma, agency, and grief.

The appeal of 'broken but powerful' women thus lie in their contradiction. They subvert expectations by embracing instability as both vulnerability and strength. Their madness becomes a form of resistance—an imperfect, sometimes destructive, but deeply human way of reclaiming agency in a world that has stripped it away.

This evolution has implications for the future of the trope. Madness, when thoughtfully portrayed, is no longer a spectacle for audience consumption but a narrative tool for exploring character complexity, relational dynamics, and social critique. It offers a powerful critique of the traditional madwoman trope, allowing us to reconsider what it means for a woman to be labelled as 'mad.'

For Jinx, the question 'How crazy am I?' is not rhetorical—it is a measure of her inner conflict, her desperate longing for connection, and the emotional cost of survival. Future representations of the madwoman must reckon with this duality: not simply whether a character is mad, but what that madness reveals about the world she inhabits—and what it costs her to survive it.

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