I Am the Man Who Can: Exploring Female Empowerment in Wonder Woman

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A revolutionary female character was invented by a man in 1941, and this may be enough to justify the rejection of that character by fourth wave feminists. The mere fact that she was a man's idea warrants scepticism: she could not have been created with good intentions in mind, surely, she is just another product of the patriarchy tainted by misogyny, certainly she was invented to satisfy the male gaze in a new way -- or was she? Diana Prince was presented as an extraordinary woman, an incredibly strong woman, an exceedingly beautiful woman with a penchant for justice, the ideal, albeit sensationalized woman. She was a wonder to behold, initially on the pages of DC comic books and later in a TV adaptation starring Lynda Carter. Wonder Woman creator, William Moulton Marston, intended for her to "set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free courageous womanhood and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men" (Albertson, 2016, p.2). Clearly, the goal was to narrow the gap of inequality between men and women with the invention of the first well-known female superhero, not to

objectify them in a new way. Marston not only stated that he wanted to portray womanhood as something good and powerful, but he was personally involved in the suffragist movement adding credibility to his claims (Albertson, 2016, p.2). We don't have to admit that he did something innovative in the field of media and entertainment, but it remains true that Marston broke a glass ceiling in an industry that almost exclusively sent little girls the message that they'd only be fit for the role of doting housewife or damsel in distress, too beautiful and frail to make any sort of difference in their own suffering or the troubles lurking outside. Wonder Woman showed these young women that they could be more.

But what does 'more' include? For a season of American history, it included living up to one's potential as a woman and freely following one's dreams. Up until the emergence of Second Wave feminism in America, feminist and social critic Camille Paglia observed that "women's achievement and public visibility were very strong", not necessarily politically but in other spheres they received the recognition they deserved for their accomplishments through the 20s and 30s (Paglia, 2008, p.8). The new feminism of the 60's though, dismissed these "…enterprising, path-breaking women as "male-identified" and allegedly indifferent to the needs of women as a group" (Paglia, 2008, p.9), which Paglia (2008) refers to as "depressing", and

I'd have to agree. This outlook shows how feminism can be considered a house divided against itself, as it's not necessarily unifying for frontline feminists to disregard the former progress that made it possible for their stage of the movement to take root. Women rode the high of that pre-second wave golden era for a while, until the headway made was undone by the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the outbreak of World War Two (Paglia, 2008, p. 9). When men were at the front, women had to follow Rosie the Riveter's example and take over factory jobs, but as soon as veterans returned, women were expected to step aside. Following the second World War, there was a collective longing shared by both men and women for the comfortable normalcy of domesticity and family life, subsequently, it didn't take very long for gender roles to repolarize (Paglia, 2008, p.9). According to Paglia (2008, p.9), "In the late 1940s and '50s, movies, television, and advertisements promoted motherhood and homemaking as women's highest goals." Thus, Marston's Wonder Woman debuted against a backdrop of the resurgence of traditional American gender-roles. Diana Prince presented women who longed for something other than domestic bliss with the possibility of imagining themselves as powerful, active difference-makers, and that alone held power in the cultural climate of the time. For girls who became women in this

recycled age of limited career and lifestyle options, the idea that there could be an alternative to housewifery might not have even occurred. For the first time raucous little girls could see themselves represented outside of the world of dollhouses and tea parties in the action-packed escapades of this never-before-seen hybrid of a woman, who was both a beautiful Amazonian Princess and a fierce warrior. Wonder Woman embodied this new idea that brawn and beauty were no longer mutually exclusive, in her they coexisted.

This is where the gender politics come in. We have a perfect specimen who fits conventional American beauty norms like a glove: a thin, white, gorgeous, heterosexual female, whose comic sales skyrocketed when controversial writer Mike Deodato began to gradually yet aggressively oversexualize the Amazonian in the mid-1990's (Cocca, 2014, p.2). Yet her sex appeal and appearance are not what define her, as she embodies many other honourable qualities that go beyond aesthetics. Few would argue against Wonder Woman's allure, but Cocca states that "she also unsettles gendered boundaries through performing a determined, astute, formidable warrior" (2014) while simultaneously basking in the advantages of pretty privilege. This dichotomy, Cocca argues, is what has led to many writers exploring whether Wonder Woman can or *should* be considered feminist, with some scholars going as far as declaring the

character anti-feminist (2014). The 1972 edition of Ms. Magazine, a feminist publication founded by activists Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes, features Wonder Woman on its cover. This decision was hugely criticized by fellow feminists and received major pushback from radical feminist group the Redstockings' who said that Wonder Woman "looked like a sellout of everything the feminist movement stood for" (McNiell, 2016). The group also openly rejected Steinem and Hughes feminism as they had ties to capitalist corporations which the Redstockings' considered contrary to feminist ideology. Elaboration is needed to explain why Wonder Woman was considered a sellout by the Redstockings', but no evidence of her abandoning the essential moral conviction at the core of her character is provided. If one of the shortcomings of the brand of female empowerment that Wonder Woman stands for is her character's perceived association with capitalism and vanity, critics may be comforted by the fact that we're dealing with a fictional character here who has no consequential effect on American politics or social issues. Batman and Robin will not get taxes lowered, Spiderman will not eliminate the opioid crisis, Superman did not come to us from Krypton to obliterate toxic masculinity and machismo culture…and Wonder Woman is not out in America as the devil on the shoulder of depraved men convincing them that objectifying and exploiting women is

okay. We must become our own heroes in the real world. And it is no crime that a character exists in the world of DC Comics (regardless of how writers and illustrators have undressed her over time) that may inspire young women to challenge limits and dream of changing the world, defending the vulnerable, and defeating the villains in their own lives.

In a 2013 article, Avery-Natale refers to Wonder Woman as "one of the most fetishized superhero characters", a far fall from what Marston intended in creating "an alternative to the obsessive masculinity of comic books…who had functioned as a metaphor for American nationalism and women's position in American society" (Avery-Natale, 2013, p.2). Again, there is little evidence to support this alleged fetishization of Wonder Woman, other than references to her being illustrated in bondage, which critics consider sneaky odes to BDSM that promote heterosexual male and lesbian fantasies (Avery-Natale, 2013, p.6), and not at all similar to the conundrums male superheroes find themselves in, bound by rope with their mouths taped shut by henchman. Avery-Natale (2013) noted that women appear in bondage more frequently than men, but is this intentional or could it be chalked up to the fact that scientifically, because of biological differences, women are more likely to be physically subdued (Hunter et al., 2023)? Why is the situation automatically sexual when it's a woman being tied up instead of

a man? Is this not a sexist jump to conclusions? Isn't this gender-based hyper-sexualization of the character exactly what is supposed to be avoided? Why is it inherently sexy if it's Wonder Woman being restrained, but not if it's Superman? These questions remain unanswered. Another thing that is noted to support this anti-feminist view of Wonder Woman is the image coding prevalent in the comic book industry. A 2005 study referenced a "How to Draw" guide by Wizard Entertainment indicating that within the guide female characters were coded for breast size, hourglass figures, lips, facial expressions, and hairstyles using the guide's discussion on how to make women appear "sultry" (Avery-Natale, 2013, p.5). However, this guide included very clear ideals for physical attributes of male superheroes as well, making mention of coding for abdominal muscles, including individual ab muscle definition, thinness and form, and the assertion that men should be drawn with a standard "V" shape (Avery-Natale, 2013, p.6). Thus, it can be concluded that there is equal objectification across genders in comic books and in widespread media, sex sells to both men and women. One could also argue, and I will, that we are dying on the wrong hill here.

Fictional, animated sexual objectification and exploitation of either gender is not helpful, but the depiction of characters defined by integrity, agility, impressive physical

strength, strong moral conviction, and beauty could be inspiring. I find a much more damaging phenomenon in the elevation of real human women, "perfected" by surgical procedure and the beauty industry, as an ideal. This convinces consumers that perfection is not just something to be daydreamed about, in the same way we imagine we can fly, but it's something to be attained. With the deification of these celebrities, the lines between what is fake and what is real are blurred, and image becomes everything instead if just an element of the whole as it is with many females in fiction. Lynda Carter in a patriotic polyester one-piece is a much better role model than Kim Kardashian. Illustrations of fictional characters are supposed to be sensational and, in a sense, unreal, which Wonder Woman is, and this isn't another transgression against Western women to add to the list. I specify the Western woman since "feminists" in developing countries may be too preoccupied with causes such as the right to attend school, fleeing child marriages, or healing from female genital mutilation to worry about the unrealistic perkiness of Wonder Woman's breasts.

The fact that reprehensible and oppressive practices are everyday realities for women in the third world does not negate the fact that we have our own issues here, but I think it does help to put issues such as the Wonder Woman debate into perspective. As much as there is obvious sexualization in the later depictions

of Wonder Woman as writers deviated from Marston's original vision for the character (Cocca, 2014, p.2), this is not enough to label the character a legitimate threat to feminism. We live in an era of hyper-sexualization, with a departure from traditional modesty being hailed as progressive. Modern culture is flooded with claims that freedom to express sexuality in a very open and enthusiastic manner is an indicator of authentic postmodern feminism. This is contradictory: Wonder Woman is a hypersexualized depiction of a woman, and that is anti-feminist…but it's feminist to hypersexualize oneself? One cannot rely on cherry-picking, double standards and mining for offenses to underpin and fortify positions. Are we, women of the West, so bored with the various freedoms afforded to us in a progressive and prosperous society that we're perpetually displeased unless we have something more to fight for? Because this isn't a solid foundation to build a healthy brand of feminism upon. We are not the women of the 50's anymore, confined to the kitchen and a long life of baby-making, child-rearing, cleaning, homemaking, swallowing opinions, smothering preferences, and burying aspirations that don't align with what is proper for a lady. To the women of that time, Marston sold a dream, by putting a female character in a position she'd never been in before, the main character of her own story, alongside these amazing heroic characters that were predominantly male.

These days, we can *be* anything we want…go to any post-secondary institution we want for as long as we can afford, stay single forever or get married, have zero kids or have ten kids, wear booty shorts or burqas, gain a position in a male-dominated industry, read what we want, watch what we want, eat what we want…the sky is the limit, a sky we seem to rage against. Many prolific women who successfully juggle a career, a husband, self-care, the duties of motherhood, personal hobbies, and maybe even a side hustle, who are commended for "doing it all" are commonly referred to as "Wonder Woman". A character's name doesn't become synonymous with female excellence if she is not something to aspire to, or at the very least, a remarkable female to admire. Wonder Woman as a concept is feminist and Wonder Woman as a character is feminist. If she is sexy, and satisfying to the male gaze, feminists can be angry that men get some bonus eye candy without realizing the irony of simultaneously delighting in a shirtless Clark Kent, but her sex appeal clearly wasn't the point of her existence (Albertson, 2016). Wonder Woman is undeniably *for* women, even if we can't imitate her in being as "strong as Hercules", as "wise as Athena" and as "beautiful as Aphrodite" (Albertson, 2016, p.1), we can still follow her example of strength, shrewdness, ferocity, grace, bravery, and the pursuit of truth, justice, and moral goodness above all else.

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