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Wonder Woman: Feminist Icon of the 1940s

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my research concerning the super heroine Wonder Woman is to identify the circumstances under which the comic was created, why its creator was set on using the medium of comics, the messages he was trying to communicate to American society regarding the roles of women, and why it has maintained its fan base from the 1940s to the present. My use of feminist and iconographic analysis provided me with a wealth of information concerning how this avant-garde comic series contested the widely accepted conventions concerning women with its sarcastic images and pejorative text. Creator William Moulton Marston in collaboration with comic artist Harry Peter set into motion a wave of feminist nuances within their comic run of Wonder Woman that aided the epoch of female empowerment during the 1940s. The text coupled with the artwork created a cohesive whole upon which the creative team could instill their views on contemporary society. Wonder Woman's personage gave both men and women an icon of what a woman was capable of should she possess an air of social, political, and sexual autonomy. I came to the conclusion that upon creation, Marston infused an image of a strong-willed woman among his contemporaries that he hoped would one day overtake its widely traditional submissive counterpart, and not only in the realm of comics.

Keywords: Wonder Woman, feminism

"In the beginning, there was Wonder Woman. And in the beginning of Wonder Woman, there was feminism".ⁱ Following the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a Harvard-educated psychologist by the name of William Moulton Marston took it upon himself to enter the realm of the comic book world. Not only was he taking on a medium that was not strictly speaking "popular", he also endeavored to create a female super hero character and endow her with traits not typically associated with the female sex. Inspired by his wife Elizabeth Holloway Marston to create a female super hero character, Marston envisaged a character with the likeness of his secretary and assistant, Olive Byrne Richard (she had dark hair, blue eyes, and wore metal bracelets on both wrists).ⁱⁱ Marston had already established a name for himself in the psychological field, had written several

books, and is known today as the brains behind the lie detector test. He, his wife Elizabeth, their four children, and his lover Olive Richard all lived together. While the men were away at war following the Pearl Harbor attacks, women were allowed to enter the work force and go outside the confines of their designated and widely-accepted social "place", be it the nursery, the home, or the kitchen within it. This radical change corresponds to the shift of conventions generally accepted in the American mindset concerning the roles of women within the domestic, economic, and political spheres that are explicitly disclosed in Marston's work. His creation of Wonder Woman, in collaboration with comic artist Harry Peter, instilled an image to contemporary 1940s America of what a woman could, should, and would look like in the generations to follow. Her origin story, costume, supernatural

powers, and weapons were all carefully designed to communicate a feminist perception, an idea strongly advocated by Marston. Depictions of her comprise themes of bondage, unprecedented female vigor, capacities to "make it" in situations otherwise attainable by men, and an obstinate refusal to submit to male supremacy. Her weapons symbolize the superiority of females and disinclination to acquiesce in a predominantly male society in reality as well as the comic book world (most, if not all super heroes in the comics medium were male).

In the early moments of the creative process, Marston described his ideas concerning the ways in which he wanted to portray Wonder Woman, and at the same time, his mental picture of the ideal contemporary 1940s female. A letter that included his pitch stated that he wanted to depict, "a character with all the allure of an attractive woman but with the strength also of a powerful man. Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world".ⁱⁱⁱ Marston went on to explain that what women lacked was the self-realization to dominate in the most exigent of circumstances, whether it was defeating a dastardly villain within a comic book, or doing something in the real world that was normally delegated to the capable hands of men. He believed women were far more competent to govern a peaceable society than men, due to their affectionate nature and inclinations to resort to love, as opposed to violence and war. These were attributes that should be equated with strength and not weakness, in Marston's view. Along with the script sent to his editor Sheldon Mayer, Marston slipped in a rather daring remark condemning any alterations to the feminist tone of his comic saying, "I fully believe that I am hitting a great movement now underway

— the growth in the power of women, and I want you to let that theme alone, or drop the project".^{iv} Shortly after, Marston chose Harry Peter, a comic artist who drew for the *San Francisco Chronicle* as well as the well-known *Mutt and Jeff* comic.^v At the start, it took some finesse to reach a happy medium between Marston's writing and how he wanted it translated through the art of the comic. Harry Peter's work from previous comic strips was described as a bit crude, but after hard work, Peter's rigid 19th century style ended up working well since it was, "not entirely inappropriate for the story book world in which Marston disguised his tales of gender conflict and sexual liberation".^{vi}

With all the "girl power" and feminist nuances of Marston's comic run, it is not surprising that the public assumed his comic was directed toward a female audience. Quite the contrary, Marston's message was mainly aimed at males, particularly little boys. It's interesting to note that to this day, the majority of Wonder Woman comic book readers are male (estimates run as high as 90%).^{vii} Whether or not the sexually stimulating themes of female bondage and a woman with a "sick bod" in sexy hot pants were the reasons for a largely male fan base are left up to debate. Nevertheless, Marston explained he wanted to present a positive and empowering representation of women to young boys at an early onset, through a feminist lens. Les Daniels agrees, "Marston always felt that males were the ones who needed his message most. If he really did succeed in altering the social climate, it might have been by exposing millions of little boys to the ideals of feminism".^{viii}

And thus, the adventures of Wonder Woman began. She was first debuted in December of 1941 in the 8th issue of *All Star Comics* in which her origin story, the events that led to her arrival in the U.S., and the

history of the Amazons were revealed. The Amazons were known as the strongest race of women in the world, led by Queen Hippolyte. Hercules, the Greek god of power, ingenuity, and sexual dexterity, came upon the Amazon women and endeavored to overpower them. Using her "magic girdle", Queen Hippolyte defeated Hercules. Working her over with his manly charm and wit, the queen naively gave in to the ideas of love and Hercules got hold of her "magic girdle", thus enslaving the Amazon women. Desperate, the queen interceded to Aphrodite for help, which she did. Finally, victory was won and the Amazons were sent to an unfamiliar island known as Paradise. From that day forward, at the order of Aphrodite, the Amazon women wore bracelets of Amazonium metal as a reminder to never yield to the powers of men, and to be wary of their inevitable deceit.

While on Paradise Island, the queen felt the strong desire for a child and fashioned one out of clay. Aphrodite granted it life, and the queen named her Diana (whom we know today as Wonder Woman). She soon grew up and trained to become an Amazonian warrior. One day, Princess Diana and a friend were in the forest and stumbled upon a crash-landed plane. There, they encountered an American man, "Captain Steve Trevor of the Army Intelligence". Following these events, the queen decided to host an Olympic-style fight to seek out a warrior to accompany Captain Trevor back to the U.S. and aid in the war effort against the Axis Powers. Princess Diana remained the lone victor and was given the spangled costume we all know and love, which was fashioned by the queen herself.^{ix} The rest is left to comic book history. The message behind Marston's portrayal of the Amazon women is clearly feminist, in that their society consists only of empowered females. The Amazonian women were placed at the forefront of society, engaging in activities like war,

hunting, and training to become warriors. Men were not needed, and therefore it was forbidden to interact with them. It was thought by Queen Hippolyte that men were a dangerous sort, and not to be trusted. Surrendering to a male meant losing all Amazon strength. This conceivably could have been Marston's way of implying that men were the reason in 1940s society for the hardships women had to undergo.

Now that we have a firm grasp on the history behind the lovely Amazon princess, we can make connections with the meaning of her costume and other accouterments. Wonder Woman, like her other Amazon sisters, wears the Amazonium bracelets, which she used when competing in the Olympic fight to deflect bullets. They function as a symbol of former male authority. Next, she has a magic lasso, also known as the "lasso of truth" in which anyone within its grip is coerced into telling the truth. Wonder Woman also has the ability to "erase memories" with this weapon.^x Wonder Woman's final accessory is her invisible plane, controlled only by her mind and which allows her to travel from place to place without being seen. Perhaps the most significant part of her entire super hero ensemble was the costume itself. Although Marston's ideas of Wonder Woman were cooking well before the onset of Pearl Harbor, she was not introduced into the comic book sphere until after the events occurred. Consequently, this could not have been a more opportune moment to showcase a female warrior donning an Americanized costume and draft her into defending the nation amidst the atrocities brought on during WWII. Mitra Emad agrees, "As a major impetus for the emergence and narrative strength of the comic book, World War II provided the socio-economic script for specifically gendered representations of the nation. The socially accepted gender roles for

women during this historical period were in flux".^{xi}

Fig 1. *Sensation Comics* #1, January 1, 1942, Harry G. Peter, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 33.

On the cover of *Sensation Comics* #1 (Fig. 1) that was released in January of 1942, we see two large buildings of gray stone in the background, one on the left and the other on the right. The building on the left is outlined with a row of short lines shooting outward, giving the illusion that the building is glowing. The building on the right has a waving flag at the top of a pediment styled roof. In the foreground, on the middle left side of the cover is a woman with long, dark hair and fair skin in a running pose. She is rendered wearing a gold crown adorned with a red star in the center. She wears a corseted, strapless dress of red, white, and blue with a golden eagle whose wings spread across her chest. She's also shown wearing bracelets on both wrists, and a pair of red heeled boots with a white stripe trailing from the tops of

the shafts to the tips of the toes. Directly below her is a man with a fearful expression whose hat has toppled from his head and gun has slipped from his grasp. Diagonally from the woman are two suited men. They are both depicted firing guns at the female figure, who dodges the bullets via her bracelets. We can clearly recognize the two buildings as the Washington Capitol building and the Temple of Justice in Washington D.C. The woman described can be understood as Wonder Woman and the men firing guns as criminals out to cause trouble by way of violence and destruction.

Because this was the first comic issue of Wonder Woman as a lead character, Marston and Peter were invested in creating an image of an Americanized woman who could take charge in a dangerous setting. The significance of the buildings rendered in this image function as iconographic symbols of Americana, an image that the American populace strongly needed in the midst of war. Moreover, the Temple of Justice can further suggest Wonder Woman as an iconic figure of righteousness and justice in the rampant unjust system of social culture for the female sex at the time. This representation of a strong woman was in striking contrast with the common housewife of the 1940's. The feminist message communicated was that a strong, proficient, able-bodied female could overtake that of a male, which was fundamentally accepted as the superior sex in this era. It reversed the principle that women had to be tougher and greater than men in order to be given equal opportunities within a male-dominated culture.

Fig 2. *Sensation Comics* #9, September 1, 1942, Harry G. Peter, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 61.

In September of 1942, Marston and Peter released *Sensation Comics* #9 (Fig. 2).^{xii} Within the comic were two particularly striking panels with respect to image and text. Marston himself claimed, "the potency of the picture story is not a matter of modern theory but of anciently established truth. Pictures tell any story more effectively than words".^{xiii} In the first panel, Harry Peter depicted a blond man with an angry countenance with his left hand thrust forward in the direction of a seated woman. The female figure is sitting in a green chair and is wearing professional attire, black glasses and a 40s style hat. Her left hand is raised up, as if in alarm. The following panel shows the same figures, only the background reflects a household kitchen. In the foreground, the male figure is shown bent over, fixing a chain from the kitchen stove to the raised right ankle of the seated female. The male form illustrated in these panels is Wonder Woman's romantic interest, Captain Steve Trevor. The female is undisputedly Wonder Woman herself, but shown in the guise of her alter ego, Diana Prince. By reading the text within the panels, we can understand this image in two ways: On one hand, we can understand the scene as Captain Trevor's frustrations with Wonder Woman's alter ego who apparently is making no effort to find employment. His immediate response is to punish Diana by way of bondage. In

response, she points out the barbaric and chauvinistic nature of his actions.

While these images appear a bit over the top, they effectively make a striking and extremely powerful denouncement of the social circumstances of women in the 40s. The kitchen setting functions as strong iconography associated with female roles, more specifically, the expectation of women to "know their place" (in this case, the kitchen). The amusing rebuttal on the part of Wonder Woman's alter ego is clearly the voice of William Marston, stating his distaste for prejudiced views of the duties a woman was expected to perform. An ironic constituent of the Wonder Woman comic that Gloria Steinem pointed out was that, "only the villains bought the idea that 'masculine' meant aggression and 'feminine' meant submission".^{xiv}

One aspect of Wonder Woman's alter ego that is worthy of note is that Marston and Peter were generating an image of the current social climate surrounding the female race in the 40s. Diana Prince's character was a submissive and rather weak female who failed to stand up for herself, especially in situations like the panels previously described. Gladys Knight explains, "Many superheroes had an alter ego, someone who was usually dramatically weaker than the superhero. The alter ego was merely a mask, a facade, behind which superheroes hid their true identities from the world".^{xv} Wonder Woman's character was their proposed improvement to the norm. Wonder Woman possessed all the qualities that the 1940s female lacked, and then some.

Another interpretation of this image may be that Marston and Peter were trying to communicate to female readers that they were in part responsible for or allowing their current inequities to continue. At this point in

American history, men were overseas fighting the Axis Powers. Therefore, due to economic need, women were *encouraged* to enter the workforce. That is not to say that there weren't women in the workforce beforehand, but the numbers were greatly heightened during WWII. As such, this image may reflect a tonal shift in socially accepted gender roles. Diana in chains may be an iconographic symbol of women's consent to adhere to the male status quo and failure to "put on their big girl pants", and say "NO". Steve Trevor's actions connote the lifestyle a woman would be tied to, should she choose to remain in a domestic setting and never venture into the "world of men".

Another influential image of Wonder Woman as a physically powerful woman is the cover of *Sensation Comics* #13 released in January of 1943 (Fig. 3).^{xvi} In the upper left corner of the cover, we see a female figure standing with her left foot forward. She's depicted throwing a ball down a wooden platform which we see about to hit

three pins, atop of which are shown three male heads colored in gray. Each is shown with distinctly different facial features. Additional scrutiny tells us this is an illustration of Wonder Woman at a bowling alley about to knock the heads of the three Axis leaders (Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini) right off the bowling pins. The three females in the background are recognized as Etta Candy and the Holiday girls. Etta Candy is known as Wonder Woman's sidekick and a former student of Holiday College.^{xvii} The other two females are current Holiday students cheering Wonder Woman on. Les Daniels remarked, "Wonder Woman's most omnipresent allies were Etta Candy and the Holiday girls...This glamorous army, usually clad in red shorts and white sweaters, would accompany Wonder Woman on countless adventures".^{xviii}

This arresting image functioned as iconography associated with defeating the Axis leaders as well as a feminist commentary on women's capacity to participate in the war effort. Wonder Woman's initial interest in escorting Captain Steve Trevor back to the U.S. was to aid against the violence of the war spurred after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Harry Peter uses the scene of a bowling alley to make light of a precarious situation in contemporary American history, which is effortlessly taken on by a strong female character. By placing a woman in the midst of a war-zone setting, Peter utilizes the unprecedented traits of Wonder Woman to "testify to her pop-culture status as the 'ideal' woman. They also reflect both a patriarchal society's need to redefine those ideals according to cultural and economic circumstance".^{xix} This cover not only served as an image of pop-culture that would appeal to masses of comic readers, but also as symbolic propaganda for crushing the

Axis powers during WWII, and that a woman could be the one to get the job done.

Fig 4. *Wonder Woman* #90, May 1957, Harry G. Peter, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 98.

Finally, the year 1957 marked the creation of one of the last covers by Harry Peter, *Wonder Woman* #90 (Fig. 4), which was released in May. Peter designed this splash page as a humorous jab and denouncement of motherhood. Here, we see a bustling city scene with men and women, whose attention rests on the central figure. She's shown with a beaming smile on her face, pushing a baby carriage. The shock on the spectators' faces is a result of there being a small T-rex in the carriage rather than a baby. The woman in the center of this splash page is none other than Wonder Woman. Whether or not this sanctions or opposes maternity is subject to debate, but a convincing argument can be made for the latter. Looking at the reality of depictions of women in the 40s and 50s, the image painted was that of a woman who wanted nothing more than to get her "M.R.S." degree, pop

out babies left and right, and make sure dinner was on the table by five when her dear sweet husband came home. Peter's rendition of Wonder Woman carting around a dinosaur can be read as a feminist viewpoint in that a woman was capable of taking on more thrilling endeavors than nursing children, making sure to separate the darks from the lights, and keeping her soufflé from sinking. Gladys Knight quotes Betty Friedan's *Feminist Mystique*, in which the author sheds light on the problem with twentieth century women by stating, "The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women...As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, and lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even to herself the silent question— 'Is this all?'" ^{xx} Peter's depiction of shock and awe on the faces of the people gawking at the sight of Wonder Woman can be interpreted as the rejection of ideas of stepping outside the man-made box for women during this era. Moreover, this image can be connected to notions concerning the institution of marriage, a choice which in the 40s and 50s inevitably led to motherhood and the end of all freedom. During this epoch of American history, the well-circulated belief and expectation of women was for them to marry, provide their husbands with children, and metamorphose into homemakers. Once that occurred, the buck pretty much stopped there. A woman traveling the world, getting her Ph.D. and becoming an independent entity was simply unheard of. Her place was the home. Knight asserted that, "Delaying marriage was a particularly meaningful choice, as many women believed that marriage signaled the end of their freedom and their independence". ^{xxi} Real-life Wonder women like Betty Friedan, Mother Theresa, and Amelia Earhart were few and far between,

but they laid the foundation for women to cross the threshold as a superior sex. Similarly, in the world of Wonder Woman, if she ever succumbed to romantic interest or had her bracelets welded together by a man, she would instantly lose her supernatural powers. The feminist connotations here are unmistakable.

Since William Moulton Marston and Harry Peter's initial creation of Wonder Woman in 1941, this feminist icon has undergone various changes as the years have passed. However, the same messages are being communicated now that were then: America as a place of freedom and Wonder Woman as an icon for female equality in the work force, in the economy, in war, and in the government. A belief in peace, love, and justice. Marston's vision of a strong woman set into place a stage for women to not only act, but *be* stronger than a male-dominated society would otherwise deem possible. In spite of everything, there are still problems with female vs. male equality in our culture at large today. However, the surfacing of obstinate Wonder women refuting these issues is not lacking, and the trail that led to this point started in one place. Thanks to William Moulton Marston and Harry Peter, we have a permanent historic force to be reckoned with, and she has inspired countless women to deflect those sexist bullets, and say, "I *am* a Wonder Woman. I *can* get under the hood of a car and change my oil. I *can* fight in a war. I *can* run for president. I *can* be more than a housewife". Unlike women in the 40s who would most likely say "Jeepers, what's a girl to do?", in 2014, when faced with circumstances of uncertainty, the average woman is more likely to say, "Come at me bro".

Footnotes

ⁱLillian S. Robinson, *Wonder women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

ⁱⁱLes Daniels, and Chip Kidd *Wonder Woman: The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess: The Complete Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱIbid, 22.

^{iv}Ibid, 23.

^vIbid, 24.

^{vi}Ibid.

^{vii}Ibid, 33.

^{viii}Ibid.

^{ix}Ibid, 25.

^xGladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2010).

^{xi}Mitra C. Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies Of Gender And Nation." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 6 (2006): 954-984.

^{xii}Ibid, 61.

^{xiii}Ibid, 12.

^{xiv}Julie D. O'Reilly, "The Wonder Woman Precedent: Female (Super)Heroism On Trial." *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 3 (2005): 273-283.

^{xv}Gladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes a Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games,*

Film, and Television (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2010).

^{xvi}Les Daniels and Chip Kidd, *Wonder Woman: The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess: The Complete Story* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000).

^{xvii}*Ibid*, 38.

^{xviii}*Ibid*, 35.

^{xix}Kelli E. Stanley, "'Suffering Sappho!': Wonder Woman and the (re)invention of the feminine ideal.(women's studies)(Critical essay)." *Helios* 32, no. 2 (2005): 143-172.

^{xx}Gladys L. Knight, *Female Action Heroes a Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2010).

^{xxi}*Ibid*, 307 .

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Fig. 2. Harry Peter, *Sensation Comics #9*, September 1, 1942, From: Les Daniels and Chip Kidd. *Wonder Woman: the life and times of the Amazon Princess: the complete story*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 61.

Fig. 3. Harry Peter, *Sensation Comics #13*, January 1, 1943, From: Les Daniels and Chip Kidd. *Wonder Woman: the life and times of the Amazon Princess: the complete story*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 38.

Fig. 4. Harry Peter, *Wonder Woman #90*, May 1957, From: Les Daniels and Chip Kidd. *Wonder Woman: the life and times of the Amazon Princess: the complete story*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000. Pg. 98.