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**Emily Muszynski**

## **The Sexualized Nature of Female Superheroes from 1940 to 1980: A Journey through Time, Comic Books, and the Women's Liberation Movement**

Comic books, in their modern form, have reflected and shaped American culture since their “cut-and-paste” birth in 1938. A year later, Superman became the nation’s first titled superhero, creating a formula that the makers of heroes have been following ever since: a hyper-masculine costumed man is instilled with some sort of power and driven to save humanity and after capturing a villain, returns home at the end of the day disguised as an ordinary human.<sup>1</sup> Many of these men had female assistants, but one woman, Sheena Queen of the Jungle, was the first self-titled, scantily-clad superheroine of these early books.<sup>2</sup> In 1941, Wonder Woman took the stage in *All-Star Comics #8*. Oversexualized and strong, she represented a new, feminist driven superheroine whose audience included both men and women.<sup>3</sup> She would later be reinvented every decade to better reflect society’s expectations of women. Regardless of feminist intentions, Wonder Woman and subsequent superheroines created in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s were ultimately created for the avid comic book readers: young men. The women’s liberation movement of the 1970s heavily influenced these superheroines, pushing for the creation of women characters that went against expectations for women to show their capacity to change society. However, even Wonder Woman and the original superheroines of the X-Men, whose feminist movement driven creators were targeting a male and female audience, were unable to

break away from the oversexualized, weak image that plagued women and women superheroes from the 1940s to the 1980s.

The audience, publishing team, and character choices of the early comic book publications of the 1930s and 1940s were almost exclusively male. Debuting in a society where men were the breadwinners and women were domestics, these books featured overly masculine god-like heroes eager to save the universe from its own destruction by defeating villains. Victoria Ingalls, an evolutionary psychologist who has studied the drive behind the creation of these characters writes, "...cross culturally, the desire to exert dominance through physical aggression expresses itself in men more than women, that physically aggressive behavior is especially prevalent in male children."<sup>4</sup> Taking this into account, it is clear that the popular hero of the time was almost forced to be a punch-throwing male superhero due to the single gendered nature of the industry and its audience. The more soldiers who were involved with World War II, the more resonant this heroic image became; comic books were targeted at young men who were looking up to or wishing to be soldiers fighting for freedom. In many of these early books, the heroes were accompanied by female sidekicks who, instead of capturing a female audience, always managed to get into trouble and needed to be saved. Historian Mike Madrid claims that these partners were an integral part of the comics of this time. Their subordinate, naïve, and "girlish" characterization reinforced the gender roles of society where men dominate women and did not attract female readers.<sup>5</sup> In this way, early comic books found their specifications; with a target audience of young males, heroes needed to fight dirty, speak dirty, and be dirty.

Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, was the first woman superhero to have her own book under this formula. Though her character was conceptualized before Superman, the self-titled comic book was released in 1942. Like comic book characters throughout history, Sheena is a product

of her time. She was created in this male-dominated industry, where aggressive behavior and annihilation of villains were paramount. Sheena embodied this idea wholeheartedly as she swung through the trees and killed hunters or jungle warriors in a savage-like manner.<sup>6</sup> Nothing was left to the imagination when reading her comic. She was pictured with a short leopard print dress, long, blonde hair blowing in the wind, showing off her voluptuous breasts [see link to image 1]. She was no doubt a woman and one made for a male audience; it was ultimately the male-dominated production team and paying audience that demanded her sexiness. Ingalls explains that “for the male mind, a hero must be ultrapowerful, females should display signs of fertility, and females...should act in ways that suggest the possibility of a sexual encounter.”<sup>7</sup> Sheena is the poster-woman for all of these aspects of the male definition of a superheroine. Consequently, the lack of a strong female viewership barred her from representing any other style. Though her overtly sexual style was contested by the more conservative lifestyle of the time, she paved the way for other woman-dominated comic books such as Wonder Woman, whose characters were sexy like Sheena but strong in message.

Wonder Woman was both a product of her time and a product of this early superheroine; her creator highlighted the sexual aspects while creating a character that embodied feminist ideas of the early 1900s. Wonder Woman, alias Diana Prince, was created by William Moulton Marston, a Harvard graduate and the inventor of the lie detector. Marston, born in 1893, grew up surrounded by a mother and aunts who were well versed in the philosophy of the feminist movement of the 1910s.<sup>8</sup> These family members taught Marston to hold women with the utmost respect, treat them as equals, and above all, love them as superior beings when compared to men. William Marston kept these truths in mind throughout his childhood and into adulthood, eventually settling down in a household with his wife, children, and his assistant.<sup>9</sup> Their

arrangement was simple yet reflective of Marston's views of women. Sadie Holloway (his legal wife, and a women's movement supporter) was able to keep her high status job and be a mother because Olive Byrne (his assistant) could be home to take care of the children.<sup>10</sup> While Holloway was able to live the feminist dream, Byrne was encouraged to be the stay-at-home mother as was expected throughout the 1930s and beyond. An apt supporter of suffrage and subsequent women's movements, Marston outwardly respected his wife and assistant and supported their wishes to go through higher education and gain a foothold in the workforce, but there was also a sense of traditionalism in their household. Thus, Marston's home life supported women's equality so long as it was convenient, and the same went for Wonder Woman's story, characterization, and image.

In 1941, under the pseudonym Charles Moulton, Marston created Wonder Woman as a superheroine that contested the ideas of the male-led industry by highlighting contradictions in the same way his own private life embraced them. What resulted was the idea that Wonder Woman was not a character strictly for boys but also gave a voice to girls in pop culture, especially those who supported the feminist agenda. Again, like comic book characters before her, Wonder Woman was a product of her time. She was created during the U.S. involvement in World War II, a pivotal time for men and women alike. As the boys were seeking strong, masculine heroes who followed the formula established three years prior, girls were also looking for an icon to symbolize strength and peace. The culture during wartime focused on the perfect peace of the past and looked for American heroes (fictional and real) to help recreate this prewar society.<sup>11</sup> Wonder Woman, an Amazon princess and descendant of Greek and Roman Goddesses, was a heroine who appealed to the larger culture while also being gendered.

Wonder Woman's origin story saw a character that was both strong and gentle, a hero and a normal citizen, as well as a fantasy object and a female liberator. She hailed from an all-woman island in the Amazon, with its own rocky past. The Amazonian women defeated Hercules but were then put in shackles and forced to be slaves to him and his men.<sup>12</sup> In the same way that supporters of the women's suffrage movement chained themselves to government gates, preaching of a time when they are no longer shackled into submission by men, Marston's comic book world established a similar society. This ancient island was an allegory for the suffrage movement and opened the readers' eyes, especially the new target audience, to the oppressiveness of men, something Marston believed characterized American society. He took this a step further by having the Amazonian society establish an all-women, self-governed civilization on Paradise Island, where women were "not only stronger and wiser than men," but also had better weapons.<sup>13</sup> This society embraced its contradictions by developing a strong, modernized community that was gentle and caring to all of its citizens, much like Marston's own home life. Wonder Woman's character further emphasized this strong vs. gentle contradiction through the very reason she became an American hero: she fell in love with an American pilot, Steven Trevor. "And so, Diana, the Wonder Woman, giving up her heritage and her right to eternal life, leaves Paradise Island to take the man she loves back to America—the land she learns to love and protect, and adopts as her own!"<sup>14</sup>

While in America, Diana (Wonder Woman) made the conscious decision to don a secret identity in order to save her relationship with Steven and protect her royal identity. While this was successful in the comic world, in the readers' world, it furthered the contradictory nature of the book. Though Wonder Woman, as a comic book, was revolutionary because it exposed the readership to feminist ideas and attracted a diverse audience, the inclusion of a secret identity

gave a mixed message to the audience. On the one hand, her secret identity was following the same hero formula that brought Batman and Superman into popular culture and doing this made her destined to be popular to the primarily male audience. On the other hand, having two identities mirrored the lives of many women during this time. They were expected to reside in the domestic sphere. They raised good-natured children while also being expected to join the workforce to replace men in the jobs they left in order to join the war effort. The women in these early issues of the comic book were often drawn in a sexy, yet masculine style to appeal to an audience of different genders. This was also a popular drawing style of the era, and through dialogue and style these characters, “epitomized this new role and the culture’s new appreciation and exploitation of women.”<sup>15</sup> Some women embraced this secret identity by comparing the Diana Prince vs. Wonder Woman internal identity crisis to their own confusion about what American culture wanted for them. Other women drew away from the comic, confused at how a woman with two identities could be a fighter for the good of mankind. The sexual nature behind these early Wonder Woman stories made some women uncomfortable.

Under the guise of the suffrage movement, Marston made chains and shackles a regular part of Wonder Woman’s adventures. Regardless of the fight or the enemy, Wonder Woman and her team were almost always being bound and shackled by men, with no hope to escape.<sup>16</sup> Historians have speculated over the reason for the excessive bondage within these early adventures. Kelli E. Stanley highlights a popular belief on the subject: “Wonder Woman’s creator was consciously inserting these themes because he believed in the message: women must sexually dominate men.”<sup>17</sup> Marston’s own beliefs in the superiority of women over men fueled Wonder Woman’s own image and adventures. Once again, this was contradictory in application. If Marston was really wishing to push a feminist social agenda, why promote a character in

skimpy clothing who relives sexual fantasies repeatedly? There is only one answer to this question: sex sells.

Statistics from 1940s and 1950s reflect this statement in different respects. Though Wonder Woman's appeal to female audiences during her first decade is questionable, 1944 survey results from the Market Research Company paint a different picture. According to the survey, ninety percent of boys and ninety one percent of girls aged six to eleven were regular readers of comic books, while eighty seven percent of adolescent boys and eighty one percent of adolescent girls were regular readers.<sup>18</sup> What is most surprising is the percentage of female audience. Within ten years, the primarily male-dominated comic book industry opened its doors to female Wonder Woman readers. Did Marston's motives successfully give voice to America's women? Yes and no. In terms of audience, the large percentage of female readers may be attributed to Wonder Woman's popularity and underlying social agenda. However, in terms of image, her skimpy outfit and curvy body still targeted boys. Her sexiness kept her on the shelves, while her power kept women reading.

During the 1940s, sexual references were rampant throughout the comic book industry. Wonder Woman was no exception. A particularly racy title page from 1944 shows the superheroine wearing her iconic red boots and skimpy red-white-and-blue outfit, bent over the knees of Etta Candy [see link for image 2]. A strong feminist movement and activist culture was missing during the first half of this decade because of the Second World War; women were involved in keeping the home front as efficient and peaceful as possible, and the focus was on winning the war. It was not until the 1950s, when former soldiers settled in at home and the G.I. bill provided educational and economic opportunities, that society became censored for sexual content. The Comics Code Authority was created in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association



of America as a set of guidelines to regulate the comic book industry, warding off subject areas that contested the “wholesome” family life of the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> While it outlines many guidelines for the popular dime crime comics, the statutes on costume, marriage, and sex significantly influenced the superheroines. Specifically, “females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities,” and “sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden,” were two standards that slammed the brakes on the style and image of Wonder Woman and her sidekicks.<sup>20</sup>

The 1960s was a turbulent decade in America’s history, as public opinion against the Vietnam War leaked into society. The X-Men were created in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as a superhero team with human, more “realistic” characters.<sup>21</sup> The X-men, a team of mutant outcasts, mirrored this new social culture because they, “fight to protect a world that both hates and fears them.”<sup>22</sup> The superhero “formula” from two decades prior was also challenged by Marvel Comics’ characters. Gone were the days of hyper-masculine heroes with powers that were deemed “super” by regular citizens. The male mutants of the X-Men were more human in emotion and physical fitness than their earlier counterparts but were still clearly heroes whose sole responsibility was to defeat their enemies and fight social constructs. The one female member, Jean Grey, did not have such a clear role in the storyline. Like the superheroines before her, Jean Grey, alias Marvel Girl, was a product of her time. Though her characterization changed throughout her lifetime, her original image established her as a feminine housewife figure, not unlike one commented on by *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>23</sup>

For rising numbers of female comic book readers, the characterization of Jean Grey gave a name and image to the housewife culture outlined in *The Feminine Mystique*. Betty Friedan writes, “But still, the housewife complains, I’m nearly fifty and I’ve never done what I hoped to

do in my youth—music—I’ve wasted my college education.”<sup>24</sup> Due to the traditional culture of the 1950s, a smaller percentage of women went to college and those who did were destined to live life as a housewife, as Friedan contends. Jean Grey, established in the same year as Friedan’s book, was no different. Her role in the X-Men was not one of heroics like Wonder Woman but more of a love-interest and mother. She was the only character in the original X-Men comics that was shown going to college but was also the universal love-interest for the whole team.<sup>25</sup> The similarities do not stop there; her role on the team was almost exclusively weak and domestic. She was seen as a cook, seamstress, and nurse as well as the team member in need of saving when battling a villain.<sup>26</sup> Though smart enough to attend college, its effects were never referenced thus reinforcing her domestic role.

Jean Grey’s character opposes Wonder Woman’s for many reasons. First, her time of conception was marked by more social unrest than Wonder Woman’s. Second, her intended audience was male-dominated. Though more women were reading comics in the 1960s, the readership was still dominated by boys and men. Third, the intentions behind her character were of a matronly nature, not one of domination. These reasons are most commonly demonstrated in Grey’s relationship with her own powers and secret identity as Marvel Girl. Grey’s mutant power is telekinesis, a power that she finds useful for battling both dirt and grime, while cleaning, as well as crime [see link to image 3].<sup>27</sup> In this sense, her power was doubly downplayed; not only did she use it for domestic duties, but it also was the reason she got extremely weak and needed to be saved while in battle.<sup>28</sup> Where Wonder Woman was created as a strong female who saved her weak love interest, Jean Grey, as herself and as Marvel Girl, was both the love interest and weak link. Both of these women were products of their time and

culture. Wonder Woman was created at a time when women were going to work in men's jobs, while Marvel Girl was created at a time when women were expected to work only in the home.

Their situations simply mirror their cultural positions because Wonder Woman was created by a strong, all-women society, while Marvel Girl was pushed into an all-male team. The use of "secret identities" furthers this idea. From the reader's point of view, Wonder Woman created a subdued secret identity to better follow the social culture of America, whereas Jean Grey could not escape expectations regardless of whether she herself or Marvel Girl. Though her emotional and physical strength matured in the late 1960s, Marvel Girl's actions and image continued to relay a woman in a male-dominated world trying to gain a voice in social culture. This opposed Wonder Woman, who took a more muted style in order to better relate to the average woman. These obvious differences are a by-product of their changing intended audience demographic. Marvel Girl's more active role in the team's strength indicates a stretch into a more female-centered readership.

Regardless of intention, both Wonder Woman and Marvel Girl played into the revolving superheroine formula. Though they were given strong title roles, their dialogue and cover pages were riddled with more words about their appearance than their superpowers.<sup>29</sup> Despite the rules outlined by the Comics Code Authority, late 1960s depictions of Wonder Woman and Marvel Girl are surprising (and unsurprisingly) sexual. Due to the high amount of male readers, comic book illustrators were determined to capture the sexy themes seen before in Sheena's comics in a more appropriate manner. Wonder Woman is pictured in a form fitting, latex-like outfit that covers her skin, but leaves no curve to the imagination [see link to image 4]. Joseph Darowski writes, "Her curves are realistic, her breasts are not exaggerated in size or shape..."<sup>30</sup> Though both of the superheroines' bodies have lost the exaggeration seen in Sheena's early books, their

skin-tight, short-skirted costumes with knee-high boots allude to the same idea of sexiness [see link to image 5]. Still under sanction of the Comics Code Authority, these costume changes kept male readership, while pleasing the vast majority of conservative consumers.

Still, the characterization of superheroines is influenced most by their position in culture, and the 1970s brought a new beginning for superheroines and the American woman. In 1971, Jane O'Reilly stated, "But that was three or four years ago. Too many moments have clicked in the minds of too many women since then. This year the women in the room have not moved to their husband's sides; they have...solidified."<sup>31</sup> According to Amy Erdman Farrell, O'Reilly's article, "The Housewife's Moment of Truth," highlights the shift in women's rights culture in America from the "resurgence period" of the 1960s to the Women's Liberation period starting in the 1970s.<sup>32</sup> With its establishment in 1972, *Ms. Magazine* was one of the driving forces in the Women's Liberation Movement and the resurgence in the leadership potential of superheroines. From its beginning, the title of the magazine emulated an independent name for a woman ('Miz' instead of 'Miss or Mrs. '), regardless of her marital status.<sup>33</sup> This was a big change for women of this time, especially women comic book readers, who were accustomed to reading about superheroines whose roles were only qualified because of their relationship with men. In conjunction with O'Reilly's reflection on housewife culture, *Ms. Magazine* quickly became a meeting place for feminists, new and experienced. These experienced feminists grew up during Wonder Woman's zenith, and they remembered her fondly because of her feminist undertones.<sup>34</sup>

They chose her as their unofficial mascot of feminism during 1972. Focusing on the fight for justice that was rampant in her original books, she was even pictured on the cover, under the banner, "Wonder Woman for President," larger than life in her original patriotic costume, saving the small business with her lasso of truth while running away from war and destruction towards

peace and justice [see link to image 6]. This throwback image of the superheroine is much more patriotic and cause-driven than her 1968 counterpart. Echoing the comic book industry, an increase in readership and funds was ultimately at the root of decisions at *Ms. Magazine*. Yes, the women believed Wonder Woman should be revered for her feminist agenda, but like the early comics, there was the need to make money. As Amy Erdman Farrell writes, “Warner Communications, the primary financial investor in *Ms.*, owned National Periodical Publications, which published and was then planning to begin republication of Wonder Woman comics.”<sup>35</sup> While this relaunch into the realm of “classic” Wonder Woman attracted many of *Ms.*’ readership, it also pushed the limits of the Comics Code Authority—bringing back a sexy, dominating Wonder Woman, who in turn, influenced other superheroines at this time.

This first regular issue of *Ms. Magazine* in 1972 was not only influential in the image of superheroines during the time, but also the sexual themes and language used when referring to them. The magazine commented on the sexist language often used in American culture, specifically the use of words describing a group of people such as “brotherhood” and “men.”<sup>36</sup> The X-Men had been using these terms to describe mixed gendered mutant teams for nine years and did not opt to change their language. However, they did choose to support one aspect of the Women’s Liberation Movement the magazine often wrote on—the sexual revolution. The dialogue on the subject of sexual behaviors that started in *Ms. Magazine* jumpstarted a sexual liberation movement and culture that was translated in many forms throughout the 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

In the X-Men comics, the transformation of Jean Grey into Phoenix and the introduction of Ororo Munroe, alias Storm, mirrored the sexual awakening many women felt at this time. Starting in the 1970s, Jean Grey became increasingly more powerful, completing her transformation that started in the late 1960s. As Darowski points out in *X-Men and the Mutant*

*Metaphor: Race and Gender in the Comic Books*, Jean Grey's transformation into Phoenix in the 1970s is almost simultaneous with her first sexual encounter with Cyclops and her "fetishistic outfit" changed with her admission in to the Hellfire Club.<sup>38</sup> On one hand, Grey's newfound independence and drive put the women's sexual liberation in a positive light, claiming that women who were more sexually free could be more successful as an individual. On the other hand, liberation came at a price. She was only liberated because of her relationship with Cyclops, thus reflecting the idea that a woman was unlikely to be anything without the help of a man. Also, her change in outfit was overtly sexual, making her more appealing to the men in this newly sexualized American culture. Storm also debuted as a character in an incredibly skimpy outfit but portrayed a more dominating role, much like Wonder Woman of the 1940s.<sup>39</sup> Storm, in turn, represented the strong, independent feminist who stood her ground against the men of the group but was ultimately a visual enhancement, made to increase sales.

Once again, these heroines were a product of their time and like Wonder Woman were a force for the feminist agenda. Like all of the heroines before them, Storm and Jean Grey could not break away from the sexual fantasies of the male readership or the feminine expectations that were consistent in American culture throughout history. Phoenix's demise came from a choice to save herself or save the entire team from her powers, and in the end, it was her love for Scott that made her decision. Her last words were "tell him that I loved him!" [see link for image 7]. A half-naked Storm is left to take Grey's place in the X-Men; she soon became a motherly leader who cared for the men while looking sexy in battle.<sup>40</sup> Through rebirth after rebirth, Wonder Woman, Jean Grey, and Storm offer outlets for rising Women's Liberation movements but are always put back into their place, thus finalizing their role as sexualized fantasies whose strength and usefulness are seen through the lens of the male-dominated world in which they were

created. Though every feminist theme and reader increased the popularity of feminine superheroes between 1940 and 1980, it was ultimately the large male audience who purchased copies of the works, thus furthering the overtly sexualized, love-interest image that superheroines continue to fill today.

## Images

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