Wonder Woman: Classical Hero, Modern Superheroine, and Feminist Figure

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Wonder Woman: Classical Hero, Modern Superheroine, and Feminist Figure

In the twentieth century, a new form of literature, the comic book, was developed. The first modern comic book, Famous Funnies, was published in 1933 in the United States where comics would first be popularized. In prose, poetry, and drama, the figures, motifs, and stories of Greek and Roman literature and history have always featured frequently and heavily. It is not surprising that this new form also called upon Classical antiquity in its subject matter. However, there are few comic titles that incorporate antiquity as much as Wonder Woman. From Wonder Woman’s origins to the villains she faces, her stories and character are wrapped up in allusions to famous stories and figures of Greek and Roman literature. The very literary form she was created for, comics, is structured like that of Classical mythology and epic. Wonder Woman has carved a place for herself in both the heroic traditions of antiquity and contemporary society. This allows Wonder Woman to challenge notions of gender and power in antiquity as well as highlight similar problems with the treatment and portrayal of women in contemporary society such as being fetishized and objectified.

WONDER WOMAN’S BEGINNINGS

Wonder Woman, also known as Diana Prince, is a superheroine created by Dr. William Marston in 1941, and the titular character of the longest running comic starring a woman hero. Diana is an Amazonian princess who came to “man’s world” – 1940’s America in the middle of World War II – from her homeland, the isolated island of Themyscira, to help the Allied pilot
Steve Trevor and to protect society from injustice and destruction. Marston was a Harvard-trained psychologist and lawyer hired by comics publishers as a consulting psychologist to analyze the shortcomings in sales and offer solutions. It was during this time in his life that Marston came up with the idea for Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was created during the tail end of the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where women were pushing boundaries becoming pilots, athletes, career professionals, and taking on many other pursuits that had been reserved for men (Coontz 36). It was from this movement that Wonder Woman was born. Marston created Wonder Woman when women’s influence and power was on the rise. World War II was in full swing and the United States was facing a labor shortage. This labor shortage led to millions of women stepping out of domestic roles and into the workforce. So just as Wonder Woman was leaving her home amongst her sisters to enter “man’s world” which was in the midst of WWII, so also were American women moving into “the world of men” (Kennerly and Woods). Wonder Woman stands out as a female figure following WWII, when there was a significant backlash against the feminist movement and a bigger push for women to return to the home, as she is another example of women’s capability for independence and influence among the multitude of women who were pushing boundaries and opening doors before WWII.

Marston sought inspiration for Wonder Woman from a variety of sources. He looked to the Greek and Roman myths he had learned about in school, the emerging leaders of the early feminist movement, as well as his wife, Elizabeth Holloway, and their partner, Olive Byrne. Marston surrounded himself with intelligent, and industrious women. His wife Elizabeth obtained a law degree, was a major editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and, for most of their marriage, the primary source of income (Lepore 180). Likewise, Olive Byrne earned a degree in
English from Tufts University, pursued a Ph.D. in psychology at Columbia University and conducted psychological research, both with and independent of Marston (Lepore 124). Marston also had connections with the early feminists, as Olive Byrne’s mother, Ethel Byrne, and aunt, Margaret Sanger opened the first birth-control clinic and founded what would later become Planned Parenthood. These relationships helped create Marston’s views on the autonomy and agency of women. Marston was also heavily influenced by Holloway and Byrne during the development of Wonder Woman. In fact, it was Elizabeth’s suggestion that Marston make his hero a woman, and it was in the likeness of Elizabeth and Olive that Marston and illustrator Harry Peter created the design for Wonder Woman.

**Dr. Marston’s Feminism.**

Marston strongly believed that the world was moving towards a powerful matriarchy. He imagined Wonder Woman to be a representation of what he thought women should be and would be in the future. In a 1937 interview with the *New York Times*, Marston predicted that “the next one hundred years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy – a nation of Amazons in the psychological rather than physical sense” and that “women would take over the rule of the country, politically and economically” (qtd. in Daniels 19). *Wonder Woman* was Marston’s way of encouraging women to take more control of their lives and society. In a 1942 interview conducted by Olive Byrne, Marston and his wife’s romantic partner, she teases him that ordinary women do not possess the fantastic weapons, armor, and lasso that allow Wonder Woman to repel bullets and compel people to follow her commands. Marston disagrees with Byrne stating:

Wonder Woman is actually a dramatized symbol of her sex. She’s true to life, true to the universal characteristics of women everywhere. Her magic lasso is merely a symbol of feminine charm, allure, oomph, attraction. Every woman uses that power on people of
both sexes whom she wants to influence or control in any way. Instead of tossing a rope, the average woman tosses words, glances, gestures, laughter, and vivacious behavior. If her aim is accurate, she snares the attention of her would-be victim, man or woman, and proceeds to bind him or her with her charm. (Marston qtd. in Kennerly and Woods)

According to this interview, Marston believes that women are responsible for the strength, or lack thereof, of their influence. It is simply up to women to muster up this strength and in doing so obtain some agency. It is this power that Marston sought to portray in Wonder Woman that he wishes to encourage in all women. Marston goes out of his way to note that women can have agency over both men and women. The kind of woman Marston wanted to create in his comic was one that called upon the recent legacy of independent and enterprising women.

Fig. 1: Wonder Woman loses her powers after her bracelets have been bound together. Photo credit: https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-of-the-most-outlandish-examples-of-subtext-in-comic-books

The Problematic Dr. Marston.
While Marston certainly tried to empower women, he was not without his own controversial and contradictory opinions about women and relationships. Although Marston boasts about the influence and power women hold, and how he manifests it in Wonder Woman, all this power is tied to the sexual allure of women and their feminine wiles. The implication then is that women are only able to exert their influence in situations which allow them to display and utilize their beauty and charm. This power women supposedly possess, then is not grounded in the merit of women’s intellectual ability but in her body’s appeal. Another prominent issue with Marston’s views is that of the recurring presence of women in bondage throughout the early comics. It seems contradictory that Marston would promote Wonder Woman as a powerful and independent woman and then have her repeated captured and tied up. Wonder Woman’s bracelets if held together take away her powers – while anyone could do this, it apparently works best if done by a man – which is referred to in the comics as “Aphrodite’s Law” (Fig. 1).

Marston said about the bracelets and his reasoning for their power that:

What woman lacks is the dominance or self assertive power to put over and influence her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way. Her bracelets, with which she repels bullets and other murderous weapons, represent the Amazon Princess’ submission to Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. (Marston qtd. in Daniels 22-3).

Thus, Wonder Woman’s greatest weakness is how she is powerless to love. Marston was very adamant that there was nothing wrong with the depiction of women in bondage. Marston himself said, “Giving in to others, being controlled by them, submitting to other people cannot possibly be enjoyable without a strong erotic element – enjoyment of submission to others” (Marston qtd. in Daniels 68). Given this, it is possible to read Wonder Woman in bondage as being both erotic
and making Wonder Woman into a submissive female character despite Marston’s other intentions.

![Fig. 2: Wonder Woman tied up with her own lasso and gagged. Photo credit: http://mikesmoviecave.blogspot.com/2017/01/the-many-faces-of-wonder-woman.html](http://mikesmoviecave.blogspot.com/2017/01/the-many-faces-of-wonder-woman.html)

The issue with the depiction of female bondage is that it fetishizes women and makes them objects of pleasure. Comics use similar methods to film to create visual pleasure for the audience. As Laura Mulvey explains about film, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 837). Comics are a visual medium; they are meant to be looked at, and the authors and artists of comics invite the audience to look. By inviting the audience to look at women in bondage, where she is rendered submissive and passive, the comic creators are actively making women into objects onto which the audience, predominately men, can project their fantasies. This became
more evident when Marston received a letter from a U.S. Army sergeant stating, “I am one of those odd, perhaps unfortunate men who derive an extreme amount of pleasure from the mere thought of a beautiful girl chained or bound” (qtd. in Daniels 68). This response shows that readers were, in fact, noting the eroticism of the bondage displayed in the comic and were actively enjoying it. Another element of Marston’s depictions of bondage that is troublesome is the comparison of Wonder Woman to a bridled horse hitched to a tree (fig. 2). The tendency to compare women to animals is not new and examples can be found in the love poems of several Greek poets including Anacreon who compares a young woman to a horse, as Diana is in the image above. Sue Blundell suggests that these comparisons were used to express “admiration and awe” for the woman but that they also conveyed the “sense of wildness and ‘otherness’ of a female” (Blundell 79). Given the context of love poems, these comparisons are meant to suggest that women are to be tamed and overcome sexually. Wonder Woman being tied up, hitched like a horse, rendered powerless, and forced into submission displays how both bondage and animal comparisons are linked to sexual dominance.

The question, however, is how could Marston hope to convey feminist ideals when his comic was also fetishizing the group he wished to empower? One answer could be perhaps that the images of bondage were to grab the male readers’ attention, so he could convey his feminist message. According to Daniels, “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 exposing millions of boys…to the ideals of feminism” (Daniels 33). While it is no doubt important to try an educate boys and men about feminism and thus appeal to a male audience, is it not also important to reach out the group which you mean to empower and have created a character to serve as an example? Isn’t it important to not demean and objectify the women whom you claim
to support? Despite Marston’s ideas about the growing power and influence of women, some of his portrayal of Wonder Woman contradicts his efforts.

It is not just Marston’s fixation on bondage that brings his “feminism” into contention as his relationships with women lead to questions about his respect for women. Marston had relationships with several women throughout his life, his wife Elizabeth Holloway, Olive Byrne, and also Marjorie Huntley who also often lived with the Marstons. Before their relationship with Olive Byrne, Marston and Holloway had a relationship with Marjorie Huntley who likely introduced Marston to bondage or as she called it “love binding” (Lepore 56). It is likely that before Huntley became a threesome with Marston and Holloway, she and Marston had an affair while he was serving at Camp Upton where Huntley was the librarian (Lepore 57). Holloway seems to have had no problem with the affair, as Huntley would become an occasional third and live with them, but Marston’s having an affair and then inviting the woman he had an affair with into a relationship with his wife transgresses contemporary notions of marital fidelity. In fact, given how he introduced Olive Byrne into his relationship with his wife – threatening to divorce Holloway for Byrne – it bears asking whether Holloway was agreeable to Huntley’s inclusion or whether Marston delivered an ultimatum and Holloway had no choice but to agree.

As for Marston’s relationship with his wife Elizabeth Holloway, born Sadie Elizabeth Holloway, Marston exerted his influence over his wife by controlling what name she used. Marston didn’t like the names Sadie and Elizabeth, so he called her Betty and convinced her to take his last name (Lepore 44). Holloway (I will continue to use Holloway for consistency and to distinguish her from William Marston) resented both decisions and about last names she once stated, “As for names, we are stuck with either our father’s name or our husband’s, so choose the one you like the best” (Lepore 44). She felt just as stuck with Marston’s choice of first name.
Taking control of his wife’s name does not suggest someone who supports the autonomy and independence of women. With this and the pressures Marston put on their marriage by implementing ultimatums as to coerce Elizabeth into bending to his will, it does not seem that Holloway was able to express her desires and autonomy in her marriage with Marston.

That brings us to Marston’s relationship with Olive Byrne which is problematic in several ways. Firstly, Marston met Olive Byrne while she was a student of his at Tufts University – it is worth noting that Holloway, because of work, did not come with Marston to Massachusetts just as she was absent when he met Huntley (Lepore 112). Olive Byrne did well as a student of English earning B’s but prior to her class with Martson, she had only earned C’s in her three previous psychology classes (Lepore 113). In Marston’s class, he gave her an A just as he did in the three following classes she took with him (Lepore 113). Not only was Marston taking an inappropriate interest in a student of his and thus potentially partaking in academic dishonesty with Byrne’s grades, he also used his relationship with Byrne to observe sorority initiation practices where freshman initiates dressed up as babies and were physically disciplined and ordered about by upperclassmen (Lepore 114). As Lepore states, “Marston was fascinated” (114). The whole situation was inappropriate, and Marston used his relationship with Byrne to conduct “research” upon the sorority girls and feed his own interest in female submission.

The problems with Marston and Byrne’s relationship go beyond her position as his student. As previously mentioned, Marston provided Holloway with an ultimatum concerning his interest in having Byrne join them; his ultimatum was that either Byrne would live with them or he would leave her (Lepore 118). Holloway gave in but not without adding her own problematic contributions to Byrne’s relationship with the Marstons. Holloway agreed to let Byrne live with them on the condition that Byrne would take care of any children they, Holloway and Marston,
would have so Holloway could pursue her own career (Lepore 121). It was this agreement between Holloway and Marston that led to Byrne not finishing her Ph.D. because she was “sidetracked by marriage and motherhood” when she was neither married or yet a mother. Byrne eventually married William K. Richard, a pseudonym created for Marston to circumvent the legal problems with bigamy and preserve Byrne’s reputation, and had two sons with him, Byrne and Donn – Holloway and Marston would also have two children, Moulton (Pete) and Olive (O.A.). Byrne told her children that their father had died and later both of her children were adopted by Marston and Holloway to grant the children security and give their family legitimacy (Lepore 143). While Byrne gave up parental rights to protect her children, she was still all four of the Marston children’s primary caregiver (Lepore 153). It was upon Byrne’s “marriage” to Marston that she began wearing a pair of close-fitting, wide-banded bracelets, as seen in fig. 3, which are the same, or at least very similar to, the bracelets worn by Wonder Woman (Lepore 143). These bracelets which in the comics are a symbol of women’s submission reflect the submission potentially expected of Byrne in her relationship with Marston and Holloway. The amount of control exerted over Byrne by Marston and Holloway does not suggest Marston’s vision of the powerful women with independence and agency, but rather participates in the patriarchal society which expects the passivity and submission of women.
WONDER WOMAN’S CLASSICAL ORIGINS

In the first Wonder Woman series and in subsequent series until 1987, Wonder Woman’s origins were based off the story of Pygmalion who sculpted his ideal woman out of clay and had his creation brought to life by Venus (Ovid *Met.* 10.243-297). In Ovid, Pygmalion is disgusted by the actions of the Propoetides, who were the first prostitutes, and the female sex’s inclination toward “the many [vices] nature gave” (*quae plurima menti feminae natura dedit*)¹² (Ovid *Met.* 10.244-45). Because of his disgust, Pygmalion rejects all the women around him and sculpts his ideal woman:

intereā nīveum mira feliciter arte sculpsit ebur formamque dedit, qua fēmina nasci nulla potest, operisque sui concepit amorem.

¹ Which nature gave many [vices] into the minds of women
² All translations in this paper are mine
Meanwhile, Pygmalion successfully with his remarkable skill sculpts a maiden, white as snow, from ivory and gives her a form which women are not able to be born with, and he falls in love with his work. (Ovid Met. 10.297-99).

Rather than a man sculpting his ideal bride, Marston presents a Queen Hippolyta who is so desperate for a child that she sculpts one from clay and prays to the gods to bring her sculpture to life, as is shown in fig. 4. Even though it is Hippolyta who does the sculpting, Marston is the “Pygmalion” who crafts his “perfect” woman to serve as an example to the “weak” women of reality as Diana calls them in fig. 1. Like with Pygmalion, Aphrodite grants Hippolyta’s wish and brings to life the sculpted child whom Hippolyta names Diana. Diana is gifted with powers and attributes from various gods. In her first comic appearance, she is described to be “as lovely as Aphrodite, as wise as Athena, with the Speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules” (All Star Comics #8). As Kennerly and Woods point out, Diana’s attributes are listed in a specific order that replicates how the gods were worshipped in antiquity, “as in ancient prayer, the most powerful deity in her locality (Aphrodite) comes first, and, as indicated by their trailing position, the ‘masculine’ traits (speed, strength) serve the ‘feminine’ ones (loveliness, wisdom)” (Kennerly and Woods). Aphrodite is also the goddess who supplies all of Wonder Woman’s trademark weapons and armor. The bracelets and lasso are originally gifts from Aphrodite, though in the 2017 Wonder Woman film, the lasso is a gift from Hestia.
Fig 4: Wonder Woman’s earliest origin story (Wonder Woman #1 1942): Diana is molded from clay by her mother, Hippolyta, and is brought to life by Aphrodite.

Wonder Woman and the Heroic Figure.

The 2017 film Wonder Woman presents a different origin for Wonder Woman than that which is depicted in her 1941 debut. The recent film uses the origin story created for Diana in 1987 after DC Comics, the publishers of Wonder Woman, rebooted all their storylines and changed several characters’ origins, including Wonder Woman’s. No longer was Diana a clay statue brought to life and given a human form by Aphrodite, but rather the biological daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta. Both the recent film and the comics use this new origin for Diana and slot her into the Greek legacy of heroes. This origin makes Wonder Woman a demigoddess and opens her up to consideration alongside the demigods and demigoddesses of antiquity. Vincent Tomasso states that other demigoddesses like Helen are “depicted negatively as destructive hurricanes who cause great calamity and destruction for patriarchal society” while Diana is
“depicted positively, and she participates in the heroic exploits typically limited to male heroes in Greek myth”. This is a fair assessment as it is often Wonder Woman’s male counterparts who unintentionally wreak havoc upon society or cause an uproar while it is usually Diana who partakes in heroic deeds to help bring society back from the brink of destruction.

Rather than being a heroic figure, Wonder Woman, as Dina Dahbany-Miraglia suggests in her article, takes on a more maternal role in these crisis situations rather than the heroic one Tomasso presents: “Wonder Woman picks up after them, cleans up their messes, and maintains a constant vigilance for damage control. She is a good mum”. A more nuanced reading is that Diana takes on both these roles in any given situation. In the 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, Diana is portrayed both as a nurturer, caring for an injured Steve Trevor, and as a heroic figure who proves herself repeatedly in battle. Even still, there is no doubt that Wonder Woman accomplishes heroic feats, not unlike the feats of male heroes that came before her, and it is for this reason along with her being a woman, a demigoddess, represented in the present that Tomasso sees Diana operating as a representative of both ancient Greek tradition and present society. Tomasso writes, “As a child of Zeus, Diana co-opts that same ancient Greek legacy, working both inside the tradition as a typical Greek hero like Hercules but also outside it, as a challenger to it” (Tomasso). But while she may demonstrate the maternal function Dahbany-Miraglia identifies, the heroic traits Tomasso sees are undeniable. Diana is a challenger because she is a woman with autonomy and agency over herself and society unlike most women in antiquity.
WONDER WOMAN AND AMAZONS OF ANTIQUITY

It is not only her heroic actions that allow Diana to be a representative and challenger of the Greek heroic figure. Along with being a heroic figure, Wonder Woman is also an Amazon. The Amazons are typically depicted as a band of strong, warrior women. However, despite the Amazons’ strength, they are defeated in battle by (usually) Greek men and either Antiope, Hippolyta, or the whole group of women are taken as wives by the men who defeated them. There is more than one account of the Amazons being defeated by Theseus and the Athenian army. In Pausanias *Descriptions of Greece*, he lists more than one account of the Amazons’ defeat:

Ἡρακλεία Θεμίσκυραν πολιορκοῦντα τὴν ἐπὶ Θερμόδωντι ἐλεῖν μὴ δύνασθαι, Ὑπηρέως δὲ ἔρασθείσαν Ἀντιόπην—στρατεύοις γὰρ ἀμα Ἡρακλεῖ καὶ Ὑπηρέα—παραδοῦναι τὸ χωρίον. τάδε μὲν Ὑγίας πεποίηκεν Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ φασίν, ἐπεὶ τε ἡλθον Ἀμαζόνες, Ἀντιόπην μὲν υπὸ Μολπαδίας τοξευθῆναι, Μολπαδίαν δὲ ἀποθανεῖν υπὸ Ὑπηρέως καὶ μνῆμα ἕστι καὶ Μολπαδίας Ἀθηναίοις.

Heracles was besieging Themiscrya on the river Thermodon but was lacking the strength to take it until Antiope, having fallen in love with Theseus, who was helping Heracles wage war, surrendered the stronghold. This is the account produced by Hegias. However, the Athenians think that when the Amazons arrived, Antiope was shot with a bow by Molpadia, who was killed by Theseus. And there is a monument to Molpadia among the Athenians. (Pausanias 1.2)\(^3\)

\(^3\) Text from Loeb 93
It is important to note in this account that the Athenians built a monument in honor of the Amazon Molpadia who killed Antiope, the leader of the Amazons in this account, but that Molpadia was also a victim of Greek male violence. As to why Molpadia killed Antiope, Pausanias does not say, but Isocrates, in his account of the incident, states that Hippolyta’s love for Theseus (or Antiope’s as authors disagree which woman went with Theseus) was seen as both a betrayal and violation of Amazon law which could not go unpunished (Kleinbaum 12). In several accounts, Antiope is the queen of the Amazons, but in other accounts, it is Hippolyta who is portrayed as queen in the Wonder Woman comics. In another account given by Pausanias:

Πλησίον δὲ ἔστι τοῦ Πανδίωνος ἦρφου μνήμα Ἰππολύτης γράψῳ δὲ καὶ τὰ ἐς αὐτὴν ὑπὸ Μεγαρεῖς λέγουσιν. ὅτε Αμαζόνες ἐπ’ Ἀθηναίους στρατεύσασαν δὲ Ἀντιόπην ἐκρατήθησαν ὑπὸ Θησέως, τὰς μὲν πολλὰς συνέβη μαχομένας αὐτῶν ἀποδανεῖν, Ἰππολύτην δὲ ἀδελφήν οὖσαν Ἀντιόπης καὶ τότε ἡγουμένην τὸν γυναικῶν ἀποφυγεῖν σὺν ὀλίγας ἐς Μέγαρα, ὅτε δὲ κακῶς οὕτω πράξασαν τῷ στρατῷ τοῖς τε παροῦσιν ἀθύμως ἠχοῦσαν καὶ περὶ τῆς οὐκαδὲ ἐς τὴν Θεμίσκυραν σωτηρίας μᾶλλον ἔτι ἀποροῦσαν ὑπὸ λύπης τελευτήσατε.

Near the shrine of the hero Pandion, there is the tomb of Hippolyta. I will record what the Megarians say of her. The Amazons, having waged war against the Athenians because of Antiope, were defeated by Theseus and most of them had died fighting, but Hippolyta, the sister of Antiope, who led the women this time, escaped with a few of them to Megara. Having experienced this horrible defeat in war and having a lack of spirit for the
present situation and for being able to return home to Themiscrya, she died of a broken heart. (Pausanias 1.41)\textsuperscript{4}

This second account by Pausanias features the Amazons coming to the aid of their sister Antiope, who was carried off by Theseus. Unlike the previous account, this one makes it seem like Theseus defeated the Amazons single-handedly rather than Theseus with his Athenian army like in the previous account. What is unique about this example is the depiction of Hippolyta’s despair and hopelessness after their defeat. There have been several warriors in the Greek tradition who have lamented the loss of their friends in battle – the most prominent perhaps being Achilles’ grief over the death of Patroclus. What is different about this account of Hippolyta as compared to others, such as that of Achilles, is that Hippolyta dies of a broken heart rather than in some physical attempt to honor or seek revenge for the dead. Hippolyta does not die in battle, as Achilles does, but instead, she dies of an abundance of grief.

Apollo­dorus provides the most succinct depiction of the Amazons’ defeat by the Athenians:

\begin{quote}
\textit{διὸ ἐστράτευσαν ἐπ’ Ἀθήνας Ἀμαζόνες. καὶ στρατοπεδευσαμένας αὐτὰς περὶ τὸν Ἄρειον πάγον Θησεὺς μετὰ Ἀθηναίων ἐνίκησεν.}
\end{quote}

WHEREFORE THE AMAZONS MARCHED AGAINST ATHENS. AND HAVING TAKEN POSITION AROUND THE AREOPAGUS, THESEUS WITH THE ATHENIANS VANQUISHED THEM. (APOLLOD. EPI. E. 1)\textsuperscript{5}

Apol­lo­dorus’ account more succinctly sums up what happened, but his account uses stronger language to describe the Amazons’ defeat. They do not surrender, nor are they defeated: rather

\textsuperscript{4} Text from Loeb 93

\textsuperscript{5} Text from Loeb 122
they are vanquished. This implies that the Athenians easily defeated the Amazons while still treating the Amazons as a threat.

Herodotus provides the most different account of the Amazons. Rather than focusing on the conflict with the Athenians, Herodotus chooses to tell of how the Amazons with the Scythian men became the progenitors of the Sauromatae whose women went hunting, went to war, and wore the same clothing as men (Herodotus 4.110-116). Herodotus does not dwell long on the Athenian victory and opts to explain how the women of the Sauromatae came to have such freedom. Herodotus’ account is also the kindest portrayal of the Amazons as he does not diminish their agency nor criticize them after being defeated. However, like all the other accounts, he does not offer them praise.

Kleinbaum explains the Greek perception of the Amazons:

The Amazon is a dream that men created, an image of a superlative female that men constructed to flatter themselves. Although men never invoked the Amazon to praise women, they described her as strong, competent, brave, fierce, and lovely - and desirable too…The conquest of an Amazon is an act of transcendence, a rejection of the ordinary, of death, of mediocrity - and a reach for immortality…Thus men told of battling Amazons to enhance their sense of their own worth and historical significance.

(Kleinbaum 1)

This is more apparent in the accounts of Pausanias and Apollodorus who focus on the Athenians’ victory. Even in Herodotus’ account, the Amazons are defeated by more than one group of men which demonstrates Mary Lefkowitz’s statement that “For all their strength and skill, the Amazons always lose their battles against male heroes, especially if they are Greeks” (Lefkowitz qtd. in Kennerly and Woods). The Greeks created the fierce race of warrior women to provide
themselves with greater significance and boost their egos. Just as the Amazons in antiquity are constructions of the male conscience, so too are Wonder Woman and her Amazonian sisters. This would suggest that Marston created a powerful female superheroine and a society of women to bolster his own self-image rather than to spread feminism. Considering Marston’s problematic relationships with women, and his fixation of female submission through bondage, it is entirely possible that Marston is following the example of the authors before him and using the Amazons as a tool to further his own desires rather than to depict and promote a feminist agenda. Marston is a Pygmalion and Wonder Woman is his Galatea.

WONDER WOMAN AND THE NEW AMAZON

But how does DC Comics portray the Amazons in comparison? To begin with, the Amazonian society displayed in the early Wonder Woman comics is a Utopian one with a benevolent monarchy and technological advances beyond that of “man’s world”. In some of the later comics and recent Wonder Woman film, the Amazons still live in a rather Utopian society, but they seem to be frozen in time as they do not possess the advanced technology of “man’s world”. Where Wonder Woman once had an invisible plane to escort Steve Trevor back to his home, she now must sail from isolated Themyscira to England. There is a shift between the early comics and later ones, from the Amazons being a more advanced society to the “world of men” being more advanced. Wonder Woman starting in the 1950s became weaker and weaker until finally in the 1960s she was stripped of her superpowers and she did not get them back until the 1970s. Marston died in 1949 and it was during this year, under a new writer and artist, that Sensation Comics #94 came out with the cover (fig. 6) depicting Steve Trevor carrying Diana, a role reversal from the earlier comics where Diana was depicted carrying Steve (fig. 5). As
previously discussed, Wonder Woman was created during WWII and stemmed from the feminist movement of the time, but following WWII when the backlash against feminism increased, this backlash led to the role reversal and loss of powers but there were other changes as well. Wonder Woman during the 1950s became a babysitter, a movie star, and a fashion model (Lepore). Up until this period, there was a pull-out in the comic that was about the “Wonder Women of History”. During this period that pull-out was replaced with a series about weddings called “Marriage a la Mode” showing that women were being pushed to pursue marriage and home life rather than careers and higher education (Lepore). Given the backlash and the pressure upon women to return to the home, the writers of Wonder Woman sought to uphold these social changes by making Diana more marriage-driven and maternal.

Fig. 5 (left) Diana carrying Steve Trevor in Sensation Comics #24; Fig. 6 (right) Steve carrying Diana in Sensation Comics #94
In Contrast to the period between 1949 and the early 1970s, the early and post 1970s comics attempt to display the skill, intelligence, and strength of the Amazons. These comics, like the Classical accounts, portray the Amazons being defeated by men or needing the help of other men to defeat threats. It is the comic Amazons’ defeat by Hercules and Theseus which caused the Amazons to wear their shackles (bracelets) as reminders of their defeat. The 2017 film, *Wonder Woman*, provides one of the few exceptions as it details the history of the Amazons and shares their victories over powerful enemies in the scene where Hippolyta explains to a young Diana her heritage. However, not too long after this scene, there is a battle between the Amazons and the German soldiers in pursuit of Steve Trevor where without Trevor’s assistance the Amazons may have lost. Though they did win that battle, Antiope is killed, just as she is in the Greek tradition. What is interesting about this scene is that Steve Trevor takes on what is usually Antiope’s role – that is being the cause of the conflict between men and the Amazons. Antiope, in the film, is the general leading the Amazons against the invading Germans who have come to collect Steve Trevor who crashed landed on Themyscira. While Steve isn’t carried off like Antiope, he is the reason why the Amazons have come into conflict with men.

While the Amazons in the comics are also not wholly capable of winning a battle against men, Wonder Woman is more than capable. In the 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, Diana arrives at the front lines with Steve and their allies and discovers that the Germans have enslaved a town on their side. Immediately, Diana wants to do something, but Steve discourages her: “This is No Man’s Land, Diana. That means no man can cross it. This battalion has been here a year and they’ve barely gained an inch. This is not something you can cross. It’s not possible” (*Wonder Woman* 2017). Diana proceeds to brush off Steve’s words and goes rushing to No Man’s Land
where she draws and deflects the German machine guns, allowing the Allied troops to advance the front line into German territory. Diana does not stop there but precedes to rush towards the occupied town and with some assistance from Steve, she defeats the German soldiers and frees the town. Finally, in the climactic moment of the movie, Diana single-handedly defeats Ares and brings about the end of the war in Europe. Where her sisters are unable to win without the assistance of men, in this film men are not able to win without Diana’s assistance.

![Amazonian women in casual clothes](http://entertainment.inquirer.net/228625/look-wonder-woman-recruited-actual-athletes-fighters-as-powerful-amazonians)

**Fig. 7.** Amazonian women in “casual” clothes in *Wonder Woman* 2017. Photo cred.

**VISUAL DEPICTIONS IN FILM**

With both comics and film, it is important to analyze the visual representations because that can tell a lot about how a subject is being portrayed. In the comics, the Amazons are shown in both chitons and armor, which resembles male armor. The casual attire (fig. 7) of the Amazons in the 2017 film *Wonder Woman* does not replicate any traditional Greek style but instead resembles contemporary athletic wear with an “ancient feel” provided by the use of
leather and linen. This is an apt design choice for a society of women that lead active lives. It just makes sense for them to wear comfortable and supportive garments. In the same film, the Amazons, as can be seen on the left in figure 8, are portrayed wearing armor that would actually provide protection and breast support which is unlike much of the armor designed for women in other films of this genre which would easily allow for a woman’s sternum to be broken or act as a guide for a sword tip or arrow to the heart. The key is that the Amazons in *Wonder Woman* wear plate armor that is similar in design to male plate armor. The mostly smooth, and flat front of the plate armor comes from the armor being padded on the inside for added protection, comfort, and shock absorbance, but this reduces the distinction of a woman’s breasts.

Therefore, many costume designers opt to have women wear “boob plates” which emphasize the breasts, as seen in figure 9, but would, in reality, make a woman more susceptible to injury or death. Such dangerous, sexualizing costumes can be seen in the 2017 *Justice League* film which portrays the Amazons in “armor” that looks more like a leather bra (as seen on the
right of fig. 8) that would be worn for aesthetic reasons, not practical ones. The Amazons in *Justice League* wear tops that define their breasts and bare most of their abdomens. This combined with the bottoms – that look like underwear covered with fringe – bares most of their bodies for viewing pleasure. Laura Mulvey argues that women in film are made into passive objects for the active male gaze (Mulvey 837). This leads to many women being dressed “for strong visual and erotic impact” to draw the gaze and allow the viewer to project his fantasies upon the female object (Mulvey 836-7). There is no practicality behind the Amazonian costumes in the *Justice League* film; they were designed by a man for the male audience’s viewing pleasure. In a behind-the-scenes picture (fig. 11), there are Amazonian and Atlantean warriors standing together. The Atlanteans – who are all male in this image – are wearing what appears to be a combination of chainmail and plate armor, while the Amazons are wearing soft leather outfits with plunging necklines. While *Wonder Woman* featured costumes that are meant to portray realistic and practical women, *Justice League*’s costumes are meant to portray a pleasurable fantasy.
Fig. 9: Example of “Boob Plate” armor which here clearly defines each breast and exposes the midriff. Photo credit: https://kotaku.com/5868925/the-problem-with-womens-armor-according-to-a-man-who-makes-armor

There is a significant difference in the way men and women are portrayed in movie posters. In several popular action films such as *Avengers*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Daredevil*, the majority of the women in the posters (like in figure 10) are shown in either skin-tight clothing or very little clothing and are all positioned with their backs or sides facing the camera to emphasize the size and shape of the women’s breasts and buttocks. Men in movie posters, on the other hand, are often shown facing the camera in poses that suggest their power and strength rather than their sex appeal. This difference, just like with the impractical costumes, suggests that women characters are dressed and displayed for the male gaze and pleasure. However, in both the *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Justice League* (2017) movie posters, Diana, as can be seen in
figure 10, is not positioned like most women in action films but rather facing forward in poses that emphasize her physical strength.

Fig. 10 (left): Black widow posed to emphasize her figure in the Avengers movie poster (right): Diana depicted facing forward in an action pose in a Wonder Woman movie poster

Author’s Bias and Agenda

It is important to consider who is the author or artist behind the media we consume as every person has their own biases and purposes they wish to convey with their work. It is worthy of note that the costumes in Wonder Woman were designed by Lindy Hemming, while the Justice League costumes were designed by Michael Wilkinson. Hemming, a woman, designed costumes that were practical and realistic to the Amazonian lifestyle while Wilkinson, a man, created costumes that are more likely to attract the male gaze than protect someone in battle. The costume designs in both films are a good example of how the gender of the creator can affect the creation and how a creator’s agenda changes with gender. As previously discussed, the male Greeks used the Amazons as a way of boosting their own superiority. As the majority of texts we
have from antiquity are written by men, it is near impossible to know how women perceived Amazons in antiquity. Just as there is a lack of female writing in antiquity, there has been a lack of translations and large works by women in the discipline of Classics, but even that quickly changing as several translations by women that have come out in the past few years. What can be seen from these translations and like from the difference in costume design, is that men and women do not have the same agendas and often perceive things differently. For example, Emily Wilson’s recently released translation of the *Odyssey* will likely bring out a “new way of thinking about it in the context of gender and power relationships today” (North). This is not to say that previous translations by men are not valuable or insightful, but to point out that there may be gaps in our insight and understanding of Classical texts in the absence of texts translated by a woman.

Fig. 11. Atlantean warriors dressed in full plate and chain mail next to Amazonian warriors dressed in leather. Photo cred. http://www.goldenlasso.net/the-amazons-new-clothes/

STRUCTURES OF MYTHOLOGY AND COMICS
It is important to consider an author’s, or translator’s, biases because their purposes and agendas lead to variations in texts. In this way, comics and classical texts – particularly mythology and epic poetry – are structured in similar ways. With the two major comic book companies DC and Marvel, their individual comics all exist in one combined “comic book universe”. That is, within a company, every individual comic franchise exists in the same world and timeline as the others. For example, in DC comics, Wonder Woman, Batman, and Superman all have their own individual titles where they go on their own adventure, but you also have combined titles like *Justice League* which will have all three of them working together. The events which happen in their individual titles can have effects on the events in the combined title and vice versa because they all exist in one timeline in one universe. The same thing happens in Classical texts. Consider the *Iliad* for a moment as a combined title like *Justice League* featuring characters like Odysseus and Agamemnon. While both men are in the *Iliad*, they both also feature in their own individual tales which are influenced by the events in the *Iliad*. A better example is perhaps the Caledonian Boar hunt which has some of the Argonauts, Meleager, and Atalanta as participants. Most of the members of the Caledonian Boar hunt are seen or featured in other pieces of literature.

In addition, Classical texts, particularly myths, often have many variations. The story of Jason and the Argonauts has at least four well-known variations. The myths and stories surrounding Dionysus also often have several variations in part due to Orphic cults. Variations in texts often come from an author’s purpose as that affects what elements they will highlight and what themes they want to present. These kinds of variations also appear in comic books, which is why the origins of characters change, or their equipment, or even their motivations. As noted above, Wonder Woman’s origins underwent a change in 1987 during DC’s reboot as the
company was taking their comics in a new direction. To leave the DC universe for a moment and venture into the Marvel universe, the Spiderman comics are an excellent example of variation in comic books. Sometimes Spiderman, also known as Peter Parker, is a teenage boy who gets bit by a radioactive spider on a field trip, while other times he is a young man who gets bit by a radioactive spider during an internship. Peter’s powers also vary from series to series as sometimes he can naturally shoot webs from his hands but at other times he must create the web substance and a device to shoot it. Some of the reason for the variation in comics is to appeal to a particular audience: with Spiderman, when Marvel wants to appeal to a younger demographic they’ll print a series of teenage Spiderman. But what does any of this have to do with Wonder Woman? The structure and variation of comics being near identical to that of classical literature provide Wonder Woman another connection with her classical roots.

**CONCLUSION**

Wonder Woman is one of the original superheroines and her titular comic is the longest running comic franchises with a female protagonist. Wonder Woman has been inspiring women for over 75 years. Despite Marston’s problematic relationships and his own view of feminism and the later attempts to strip Wonder Woman of her feminist origins, Wonder Woman has prevailed as a feminist figure. Wonder Woman allows for another way of engaging with classical texts and seeing how the male authors in antiquity handled Amazons and women compared to how we now deal with Wonder Woman and her Amazonian sisters. It is clear that the male authors of antiquity used their depictions of Amazons as a way increasing their own worth and historical importance. Likewise, it can be said that Marston’s creation of Wonder Woman was to serve his own sense of importance and his desires rather than as a way of conveying feminism.
Likewise, other authors use *Wonder Woman* and Amazons for their own personal gain under a guise of feminism and push their agendas of female submission. Conversely, the female authors and directors of *Wonder Woman* use her to promote the strength, and capability of women and to help in the struggle for equality. Diana has her feet in two worlds – the classical and the contemporary – and with that, she is building a new tradition of female heroism based on Greek tradition that brings to light problems women face today with hopes of remedying them in the future with a lush new tradition.
Works Cited


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