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Wonder Woman Revealed: William Moulton Marston, World War II and the Rise of a Superheroine (1941-1959)

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Wonder Woman Revealed
William Moulton Marston, World War II and the Rise of a
Superheroine (1941 – 1959)

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An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Bates College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

Rebecca Katherine Carifio

Lewiston, Maine

March 30, 2015

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Abstract

Wonder Woman, the most recognizable female superheroine of all time, was created in 1941, on the eve of American involvement in World War II. How did Wonder Woman become popular at this time, 20 years before the feminist movement embraced her as an icon of women's power? This thesis argues that Wonder Woman's popularity can be attributed to the comics' internalization of contradictions of wartime feminine identity in popular culture, which spanned from the temporarily empowered Rosie the Riveter to ultra-feminine pin-up girls. The character also reflects the paradoxes of her creator's philosophies: Dr. William Moulton Marston, a Harvard-trained 'pop' psychologist and polyamorous genius/charlatan, believed that women should rule the world because they were innately more loving, more nurturing, and more capable of luring men into willing submission through sexual domination – ideas that managed to be simultaneously unbelievably strange and completely stereotypical. I argue that Wonder Woman's popularity was the result of the perfect combination of familiarity and novelty within the gender politics of World War II, which is further demonstrated by her deterioration into a boring shell of her former radical self after the war and Marston's death.

“Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.”

– William Moulton Marston in a letter to Coulton Waugh, 1945

Introduction

Wonder Woman: A Not-So Fairytale Princess

ONCE UPON A TIME, when the world was in the midst of the second global conflict of the twentieth century, there lived a man named William Moulton Marston who brought to life, on the pages of comic books, a powerful and alluring Amazon princess who left the all-female utopia of Paradise Island to save America – not only from the obvious external threats of Hitler and his cronies, but also from the internal threat of “blood-curdling masculinity”¹ that prevailed in superhero comics. “Beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, swift as Mercury and strong as Hercules,”² she was unlike anything the country had ever seen, but then again, so was her creator.

Mr. Marston, the man behind the princess, was an incredibly smart man – a Harvard-educated psychologist, professor and (alleged) inventor of the lie detector.³ The details of his life, however, are unexpectedly salacious. He was a feminist, but not just any feminist – a female supremacist who believed that women were actually more biologically suited to rule the world by

¹ Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 207.

² William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1942), 93.

³ Jill Lepore, "The Last Amazon," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 22, 2014.

sexually dominating men.⁴ And as if that wasn't sensational enough, he was also secretly polyamorous, living with and fathering children by both his wife, who was his childhood sweetheart, and his mistress, who was his former student.⁵

Marston's unusual beliefs and eccentricities found their way into his comic book princess, Wonder Woman, the most well known superheroine of all time. However, if Wonder Woman and her creator were so bizarre, then how is it that she became so wildly popular during World War II and in the immediate postwar period? That mystery is at the heart of this thesis.

This, and everything you will read here, is a true story – the true story of the rise of Wonder Woman. And as they say – fact is stranger than fiction.



PART I: WONDER WOMAN HIT THE BOOKS

Up until 1941, saving the world was a bona fide boys' club. Superhero comics, which had rapidly proliferated in the late 1930s, were dominated by macho, muscular men who overshadowed the few and forgettable fighting super-females. In December 1941 (incidentally the same month as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), however, Wonder Woman, a mysterious and beautiful Amazon woman from Paradise Island burst onto the pages of *All-Star Comics No. 8* and lassoed her way into the men's business of world-saving.⁶ Over the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing to today, Wonder Woman has become the most recognized and iconic superheroine of all time, *and* she did it without a "Wonder Man" – a male counterpart like so many of her female peers, such as Supergirl and Batgirl.

Perhaps more unbelievable than Wonder Woman's superhuman strength or speed are the circumstances surrounding her ascendancy into mainstream American popular culture, a story that this thesis explains. In order to do this remarkable story justice, a thorough

⁴ Michelle R. Finn, "William Marston's Feminist Agenda," in *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph Darowski (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), 14.

⁵ Lepore.

⁶ Philip Sandifer, *A Golden Thread: An Unofficial Critical History of Wonder Woman* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 6.

understanding is needed of the secondary literature in two fields – first, the ample, established scholarly work on the effects and aftermath of World War II on American women and second, the academic study of comic books, particularly, of course, those of Wonder Woman herself.

Girl Power: A Review of the Literature on American Women in Wartime and Postwar Society

A prolific amount of literature exists on the experiences of women in wartime and postwar society for good reason – it was a period of great change for women. Scholars like William Chafe agree that the most important change for women was the job opportunities created when men, who were serving overseas, vacated typically masculine-dominated industries, like manufacturing.⁷ He argues that women's participation in the workforce increased exponentially once the United States entered the war, despite initial reluctance on the part of the government and businesses, rooted in persistent gender inequality and stereotyping, to employ them.⁸ Ultimately, however, Chafe argues, World War II bettered women's position in society.

Historians after Chafe (post 1970s revisionism) have generally accepted his conclusion that World War II was a period of change for women due to their involvement in the labor market. The only notable exception to this consensus is Leila Rupp, who rather weakly holds that the increased female participation in the workforce in this period continued from prewar trends and was attributable to an expansion of the service sector; the flood of women who entered the workforce during the war was inconsequential.⁹ Other scholars fall between the two, appearing to draw on Chafe's conclusion that the war caused a great deal of change for women, but push further his passing observation that the change was tempered by the persistence of existing gender ideologies. Scholars in this middle ground include Karen Anderson, who contends that women, in particular non-white and older women, faced continued gender, race and age

⁷ William Henry Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-3, 135.

⁹ Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War : German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 176-7.

discrimination in the workplace throughout the war,¹⁰ and Ruth Milkman, who argues that the sexual division of labor, which was resurrected after the war, never truly disappeared during the war.¹¹ Susan Hartmann's work, too, is of interest to note because this thesis concurs strongly with her conclusions about women's wartime roles. Like Rupp, Anderson and Milkman, she sees limited permanent change for women after the war, but she attributes this to the lack of a coherent, unified women's movement during World War II to capitalize on the changes that the war created.¹²

Many of these historians have studied this controversial discourse surrounding changing or unchanging gender roles by analyzing how it appeared in popular culture and public images. Hartmann sets the tone here; her argument is that public discourse limited women's wartime roles as "for the duration," and that women were expected both to "retain their 'femininity' even as they performed masculine roles," giving up their jobs willingly once the war was over.¹³ This time, Rupp falls in line with her fellow historians, in particular Anderson and Maureen Honey. While all three scholars agree with Hartmann's contention in their respective works (that the public image of women stressed their *temporary* empowerment in a time of national emergency), each of the three analyzes how this appears in different mediums of representation – Rupp looks at government propaganda campaigns, Anderson draws on primarily newspapers and magazines, and Honey examines advertisements and fiction from the *Saturday Evening Post* and *True Story*.

How historians view the immediate postwar period (approximately 1945-60) is influenced strongly by how they interpreted the nature of wartime changes. Joanne Meyerowitz offers this explanation of the two schools of thought concerning the 1950s:

When we depict the postwar era primarily as a time of retreat, containment and restrictive domestic ideals, we tend to see the changes of wartime as temporary... When we depict the postwar era as a time of ongoing activism, increasingly liberal sexual norms, and

¹⁰ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 24.

¹¹ Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II, The Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 13.

¹² Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American women in the 1940s, American Women in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

contradictory cultural messages, we tend to give greater weight to the long lasting legacy of wartime social change...¹⁴

Rupp (with the caveat of never having thought there was change in the first place), Anderson, Milkman and Honey all fall into the first, more popular school, which follows the conventional knowledge that Rosie the Riveter gave up her riveting gun for an apron, a full skirt and a family, à la June Cleaver, in the suburbs. Posited first by Betty Friedan in her famous book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 (which is widely critiqued for its disregard for race and socioeconomic considerations), most historians generally accept that the postwar period was a time of retreat for women, argued most strongly in the work of Elaine Tyler May, who emphasizes the “containment” (aligned with anti-Communism rhetoric) of women in the postwar years.¹⁵ Meyerowitz’s revisionist anthology, *Not June Cleaver*, however, places her firmly in the second school, as she refutes claims of women’s willing retreat from the workforce, lack of women’s activism and women’s one dimensional representation in media.¹⁶ In the same vein as Meyerowitz, John D’Emilio and Estelle Friedman argue that contrary to sexual conservatism for which it is known, the postwar period was marked by “sexual liberation,” due, in large part, to birth control effectively severing sex from reproduction.¹⁷

The Study of a Superheroine

Compared to the copious amounts of literature on the effects of World War II on American women, the historical study of comic books is up-and-coming, but still relatively small, with the work on Wonder Woman being even smaller and newer. With the exception of a handful of two or three forward-thinking pioneers, all the literature on comic books has appeared within the last fifteen years (after 2000). Even among the books available, most are published by popular presses or independent presses, rarely university presses.

¹⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, "Rewriting Postwar Women's History, 1945-60," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 16.
¹⁶ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, *Critical Perspectives on the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 244.

¹⁷ John D’Emilio, and Estelle B. Friedman *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 242.

The twentieth-century literature concerning the historical relevance of comic books are mostly general surveys that share a defensive tone as comic books struggle to be accepted as a historical source. The first scholarly study of comic books was William Savage's *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (1990). Savage examines how comic books reflected different anxieties plaguing postwar America, like atomic bomb and juvenile delinquency.¹⁸ Savage writes like a man with something to prove to "scholars who tend towards cultural elitism," who scoff at the idea of comic books as a source of cultural history. He declares:

Comic Books and America should demonstrate anew that even the most ephemeral and seemingly inconsequential literature - and in most quarters the comic book was certainly that - can tell us a great deal about the society that produced and harbored it...I am simply suggesting another category of documentation, another window on the American experience; and I would urge skeptics to recall the time, not long ago, when the relationship between history and, say, the cinema would have been considered inappropriate for scholarly discourse. In short, if the material exists and can be useful why not use it?¹⁹

Savage's academic descendant, historian Bradford Wright, likewise exuded a defensive tone. "Comic books had been around since the 1930s, but virtually nothing scholarly had been written about them," Wright laments. "The dearth of serious research betrayed a tendency among historians...to dismiss something as ephemeral and apparently unimportant as comic books."²⁰ Wright covers a broad time period (1930 to 1980s or 90s), but he narrows his focus to the influence of comic books on primarily the adolescent demographic. He does, however, through his discussion of comic books' dissemination of contemporary ideas, values and events to youths through comic books, reveal the impact of the youth market on the rise of American consumer culture.²¹ His work only briefly touches upon Wonder Woman, and while this thesis deviates from some of his conclusions, its importance is in providing a role model for the contextualization of comic books.

¹⁸ William W. Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, 1st ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), xi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁰ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), x.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Both Savage and Wright were broad introductions to the historical study of comic books, but they hoped that future historians would use their seminal surveys as a jumping off point for more specialized study.²² As of late, this hope has manifested in the current trend of historical study on Wonder Woman, if the recent proliferation of books and articles is any indication. Within the last two years (2013 – 2014) alone, four books wholly dedicated to the history of the famous superheroine have been released.²³ Wonder Woman is an up-and-coming field at the moment, but she has by no means been exhaustively or sufficiently analyzed. The field still remains relatively small, and the reasons behind Wonder Woman's popularity have yet to be fully explored.

The most prominent discrepancies in the Wonder Woman literature arise from differing interpretations of the extent of her feminism, particular during World War II, the period of her conception and often referred to as "Golden Age" of comic books. Despite the fact that the majority of the second literature is recent, this controversy is hardly new; it originates in the writing of Gloria Steinem during the Second Wave feminist movement in the 1970s, when she repeatedly referenced Wonder Woman as a feminist icon, even going so far as to put the star-spangled superheroine on the cover of the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*.²⁴ Since Steinem, historians have disagreed over the degree to which Wonder Woman is promoting feminism, each falling somewhere along the spectrum between "feminist" and "not feminist," but avoiding the extremes. (Marston was so vocal about Wonder Woman's intended pro-female message; it is hard to deny it completely.) Leaning towards Steinem's camp, there are scholars like Lillian Robinson, another renowned feminist, whose work compared Wonder Woman to other strong literary "woman warriors," specifically the lady knights of sixteenth century epics, but also acknowledges that woman warriors are never portrayed as mothers at the same time. She maintains that this demonstrates that reproductive success and martial accomplishments have

²² Savage, xi.

²³ The last, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* by Jill Lepore, was published recently in October 2014.

²⁴ William Moulton Marston, Gloria Steinem, and Phillis Chesler, *Wonder Woman* (New York: Holt, 1972); Sharon Zechowski, and Caryn E. Neumann "The Mother of All Superheroes: Idealizations of Femininity in Wonder Woman," in *Heroines of Comic Books and Literature: Portrayals in Popular Culture*, ed. Maja Bajac-Carter, Norma Jones, and Bob Batchelor (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 134.

been regarded as mutually exclusive.²⁵ Jill Lepore contends that Wonder Woman is the “missing link” in the story of feminism, forging a connection between the suffrage campaigns of the 1910s and the Second Wave feminism of the 1970s during a time midcentury when the feminist movement was regarded to be basically silent.²⁶ Angelica Delaney and Trina Robbins both stress Marston’s explicit injection of progressive messages of feminism (and in Robbins’ case – lesbianism) into Wonder Woman.²⁷ “Marston infused an image of a strong-willed woman among his contemporaries that he hoped would one day overtake its widely traditional submissive counterpart,” writes Angelica Delany, “And not only in the realm of comics.”²⁸

Other historians, however, are not as convinced that Wonder Woman deserved the glowing praise for being a feminist role model, and many have found various “holes” in Marston’s idea of feminism. Sharon Zechowski and Caryn E. Neumann find that Marston’s idealization of femininity significantly undercuts his feminist message.²⁹ Michelle Finn agrees, holding that Marston promoted the flawed idea that the ‘ideal’ woman possessed certain innate characteristics, which included, among other things, being white, altruistic and loving. To base his argument for female supremacy “on a set of assumptions about the ‘female character’ ultimately reinforces the idea that women must adhere to the standards identified by the dominant culture as appropriately feminine.”³⁰ Both Mitra Emad and Jan Philipzig argue that Wonder Woman’s power – her assertiveness, independence and strength, for example – come from her adoption of masculine qualities, which they imply is progressively feminist, but they do not challenge why these qualities are constructed as masculine.³¹ Mike Madrid, Danny Fingerth and Philip Sandifer all see Wonder Woman falling into feminine stereotypes in her superhero duties – Madrid and

²⁵ Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Woman: feminisms and superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16-7, 20.

²⁶ Lepore.

²⁷ Angelica E. Delaney, "Wonder Woman: Feminist Icon of the 1940s," *The Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research* 3, no. 1 (2014): 2; Trina Robbins, "Wonder Woman: Lesbian or Dyke? Paradise Island as a Woman's Community," in *Heroines of Comic Books and Literature: Portrayals in Popular Culture*, ed. Maja Bajac-Carter, Norma Jones, and Bob Batchelor (2014), 145-6.

²⁸ Delaney, "Wonder Woman: Feminist Icon of the 1940s," 1.

²⁹ Zechowski, 134.

³⁰ Finn, 15.

³¹ Mitra C. Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body-Mythologies of Gender and Nation," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 6 (2006): 955; Jan Philipzig, "Ideology and Power in Pre-Code Comic Books: Struggles for Cultural Space, Audience, and Meaning" (Dissertation, Kiel University, 2011), 162.

Sandifer wondered why supposedly empowered Wonder Woman was unequal to and oppressed by her superhero peers, while Fingeroth argues that Wonder Woman's powers were constrained and never allowed to be as "over the top" as her male counterparts'.³²

Tim Hanley agrees with the feminine idealization argument, but pushes the critique further by linking it to another questionable aspect of Wonder Woman's so-called feminism – the obsessive fixation on bondage and its fetishizing connotations. He argues that Marston's brand of feminism sexualized women by maintaining that men will happily submit to female rule as women's sex slaves.³³ He, along with fellow scholar Wright, argue that bondage imagery implicitly catered to male sexual fantasies, rather than empowering young women. Both Wright and Les Daniels believe that during World War II, Wonder Woman was written for a male audience.³⁴

As for Wonder Woman's postwar fate, there is a consensus among historians that Wonder Woman changed dramatically as she retreated into the domestic sphere, and her storylines centered on more traditionally feminine subjects, like marriage, romance and fashion.³⁵ Wonder Woman lost the spotlight to her average alter ego, Diana Prince.³⁶ Emad notes that this change aligned with the postwar, conservative society that "exhorted [women] not to compete with returning servicemen for employment, to return home to kitchens and families, to relinquish the desire to 'earn your own living.'"³⁷ Lepore and Madrid observe a similar departure as well, with Craig This, Hanley and Dunne attributing the domestication of Wonder Woman to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority that regulated the allegedly nefarious influence of comic books.^{38 39} Ruth McClelland-Nugent, on the other hand, argues that despite her postwar

³² Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Ashland, Or.: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 49; Sandifer, 7; Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 81.

³³ Tim Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 16.

³⁴ Wright, 32.; Les Daniels and Chip Kidd, *Wonder Woman: The Life and Times of the Amazon Princess* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 33.

³⁵ Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body-Mythologies of Gender and Nation," 966.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 959.

³⁸ Lepore; Madrid, 188, 194-5.

³⁹ Hanley, 145; Maryjane Dunne, "The Representation of Women in Comic Books Post WWII through the Radical 60's," *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal* 2, no. 1 (2006); Craig This, "Containing Wonder Woman: Frederic Wertham's Battle Against the Mighty Amazon," in *The Ages of Wonder Woman: Essays*

transformation, “Wonder Woman never became the ideal American Cold War wife,” subverting the perfect housewife stereotype. Returning to Joanne Meyerowitz’s dichotomy in schools of thought for the history of mid-century women, historians studying Wonder Woman firmly fall in the first school, which views the 1950s as a time of containment and conservatism, the changes of the war as fleeting. These historians hold that if Wonder Woman did not conform to the regressive ideals of the decade, she was the exception, not the rule.

The recent wave of literature on Wonder Woman certainly legitimizes her status as a subject worthy of historical study and inspires this thesis, but by no means sufficiently contextualizes the famous Amazonian in the society of her conception. Many of the studies of Wonder Woman have been devoted – such as the exhaustively thorough work by Les Daniels – to chronicling the superheroine’s own history, rather than placing it in a larger picture. This is changing at this very moment; the most recent works begin to examine how Wonder Woman interacted with her time.

Jill Lepore, whose article in *The New Yorker* was the inspiration for this thesis, is exemplary of this recent trend towards contextualization. Unlike that of her predecessors, Lepore’s work does more than just tell the history of Wonder Woman, it delves in unprecedented depth into the peculiar life of William Moulton Marston and connects Wonder Woman to bigger histories, situating Wonder Woman “at the very center of the histories of science, law and politics,”⁴⁰ as well as naming her as the “missing link” in the saga of twentieth century feminism.⁴¹

However, in emphasizing Wonder Woman’s “freaky,” “secret” history, Lepore highlights Wonder Woman’s abnormality, which raises a burning question that this thesis addresses: if she was indeed so “freaky” - so out-of-place for her time - how did she enter mainstream popular culture during World War II and the postwar period?⁴² Herein lies this spectacular paradox yet to be explored that this thesis addresses – Wonder Woman was weird. She was revolutionary. Yet

on the Amazon Princess in Changing Times, ed. Joseph Darowski(Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013).

⁴⁰ Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (Random House: New York, 2014), xiii.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Etelka Lehoczky, "The Freaky, Fabulous, Feminist 'Secret History' Of Wonder Woman," *National Public Radio*, October 26, 2014.; Lepore, xi.

there also must have been something about her that spoke to the average person, otherwise she would not have been able to become so popular at this moment in time. While Lepore focuses on the arguably esoteric, radical sectors of society (suffrage movement, science, law, etc.), this thesis works to ground Wonder Woman in the circumstances of her creation and the realities of the common man (or woman) during World War II and the postwar period, in particular relating the Amazon princess to both the unusual beliefs of her creator and the contemporary discourse reflected in World War II American pop culture as a whole. Only then can we address the question that no one has yet to directly answer – how is it that Wonder Woman became popular?

PART II: “COMING UP NEXT...”

This thesis compares the discourse represented in the *Wonder Woman* comics during World War II and the postwar period to the contemporary discourse occurring in American society in order to gauge where the two align, where they differ, and if that information can be used to understand why such a radical heroine entered the mainstream at this specific moment in history.

Placing Wonder Woman and her eccentric creator against the backdrop of the social and cultural atmosphere of World War II and immediate postwar America throws into stark relief the abnormalities and conformities of her narrative. Her story, like the story of American women during World War II, is contradictory. During the war, women were empowered, but in such a way that gender ideologies remained intact, and this story is reflected in popular culture mediums of the time, such as comic books. While Marston’s radical theories of female supremacy appear in his work, Wonder Woman still reflects contemporary gender stereotypes. She was the perfect combination of familiar to comfort audiences and the unfamiliar to excite them. After the war, Wonder Woman, like other popular culture mediums, encouraged a return to the domestic role women held prior to the war, though this was hard to reconcile with her feminist origins. Her popularity during this period dipped, but her ability to respond to the public discourse is what has kept her alive for longer than any other female superhero.

In order to situate Wonder Woman in the “bigger picture,” it is necessary to see what that “bigger picture” was. **Chapter 1** explores gender norms, role and relations during World War II.

This chapter reveals that World War II causes an abrupt upset in normal gender relations as women entered traditionally male-dominated industries to replace the men who were serving overseas. The dramatic change in the composition of the workforce was not accompanied by a similar change in ideology, however. The contemporary discourse stressed that women had been *temporarily* empowered because their country needed them in a time of crisis, but it was only “for the duration” of the war.⁴³ Women were expected to maintain their traditional femininity during the war, and once the men returned, retreat back to their prior roles. This discourse on traditional gender norms imbued the mainstream of American popular culture. This chapter analyzes the two most iconic representations of women in World War II popular culture – Rosie the Riveter and the pin-up girls to see what they can teach us about placing Wonder Woman in her time.

Wonder Woman was not only a product of her time; she was also extremely influenced by the philosophies of her creator, polyamorous female supremacist and pop psychologist William Moulton Marston. **Chapter 2** will delve into Marston’s unusual life and interests (Lie detectors, bondage and popular culture, oh my!) to see how those came to imbue Wonder Woman with her distinctive weirdness. Like the superheroine he created, Marston was a mess of contradictions. Progressively feminist yet stereotypically sexist, he was brilliant charlatan whose obsession with publicity and fame belied his scandalous, secret private life.

Chapter 3 examines how the dominant public discourse surrounding gender roles and how Marston’s theories are both reflected in *Wonder Woman* comics during World War II in order to make a familiar yet imaginative superheroine that pushed the boundaries enough to get attention, but not far enough to make audiences uncomfortable. The chapter explores the extent of her wartime popularity, her feminist values versus her sex appeal to female and male audiences, and whether any female superhero, even if not created by Marston, would have been popular during World War II (the answer is no).

Chapter 4 discusses Wonder Woman’s postwar fate, which incidentally coincides with the death of her creator. Without Marston’s forceful direction, Wonder Woman fell more in line

⁴³ Hartmann, 23.

with public discourse and yielded to the postwar conservatism that dictated gender roles. Faced with mounting criticism about the subversive influence of comic books (which would lead to the 1954 Comics Code Authority), Wonder Woman, like so many real American women, retreated into the domestic sphere. Her storylines became centered on fashion, marriage and romance, and yet, she was never able to fit the mold of the perfect 1950s housewife exactly, which is why her popularity decreased.



The saga of Wonder Woman explores how the advance and retreat of American women during World War II and the immediate post war period played out in popular culture. It captures the complexities of the midcentury feminine identity. It tells the story of how one man with unusual philosophies that would have been marginalized at any other time was able to capture the nation's imagination. What's in store for our Amazonian superheroine? How did she become the most popular superheroine of all time? *Stay tuned to find out!*

Chapter 1

The Origin Story Behind the Origin Story

HOW TO MAKE A HERO

Every great comic book protagonist needs a great origin story. The origin story, in the comic book lexicon, is the backstory that explains how the superhero obtained his or her superpowers and why the hero decided to use them to fight crime.¹ Even though the medium of superhero comics was new when Wonder Woman lassoed her way onto the scene in 1941 (the first superhero comics arrived in the late 1930s), the framework was already well established by this time.² Superman, who debuted in 1938, was an alien who escaped the destruction of his home planet, Krypton, and whose human foster parents taught him to use his alien powers for good.³ Batman, who first appeared in 1939, was a billionaire who, as a child, witnessed a petty thief murder his parents, which stirred him to use his money to fight crime.⁴

Like her peers, Wonder Woman had an origin story worthy of her superhero status. First told in her initial 1941 appearance and then expanded upon when she got her own series in 1942,

¹ Jordan Raphael, and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 3; Dunne, "The Representation of Women in Comic Books Post WWII through the Radical 60's."

² Dunne, "The Representation of Women in Comic Books Post WWII through the Radical 60's," 2; Hanley, 4-6.

³ "Superman (Clark Kent)", Wikia (accessed Nov. 16 2014).

⁴ Mark S. Reinhart, *The Batman Filmography: Live-Action Features, 1943-1997* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), 33.

the origin story explained how Wonder Woman got her powers and why she is fighting evil. Here is a quick two-sentence synopsis of her origin story: handsome American army officer, Steve Trevor, crashes on Paradise Island, a secluded, tropical utopia, populated by a race of strong and beautiful women – the Amazonians. Amazon Princess Diana falls in love with Trevor and, using the name Wonder Woman, returns with him to “man’s world” to help America win World War II against “evil.”⁵ Wonder Woman’s story appeals to the conventions of the superhero genre, in the sense that it demonstrates why she chose to use her powers for altruism and not personal benefits. For Wonder Woman, the choice to be a hero was not a choice at all; it was *destiny* – another common theme in superhero origin stories – rooted in her Amazonian upbringing that taught her that her strength was bound “to the service of love and beauty.”⁶

However, like the superheroine herself, Wonder Woman’s origin story is contradictory, subtly subverting the narrative norms of the genre in two major ways – its positive tone and its protagonist’s gender. First and most obviously, she is a woman, which had never been *successfully* portrayed in a superhero comic up to that point.⁷ Her existence contradicts the typical macho man saving the helpless damsel-in-distress scenario typical of the comic book genre – think, Superman and Lois Lane. The role reversal is evident from the second page of Wonder Woman’s first appearance in *All Star Comics No. 8* (1941), when Wonder Woman carries an injured Steve Trevor in her arms, an image that would reoccur in Golden Age Wonder Woman Comics.⁸ Second, there is no trauma in her backstory that spurred her quest to fight evil. Both Superman and Batman lost their parents in horribly tragic childhood events, whereas Wonder Woman grew up in an *actual* utopia. The reason behind her utopian upbringing will be discussed in Chapter 3, but for right now, its importance is in demonstrating that Wonder Woman’s

⁵ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 1* (DC Comics 1942), 11.

⁶ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 6 " in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1943), 145.

⁷ Wonder Woman does have superheroine predecessors, such as Bulletgirl (who appears in early 1941), but compared to Wonder Woman, they are blips on the radar. See David A. Roach, *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book Icons and Hollywood Heroes* (Canton, MI: Visible Ink Press 2004), 533.

⁸ William Moulton Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8* (DC Comics 1941), 2.

backstory conforms and simultaneously subverts comic book norms, just like the character herself conforms/subverts wartime societal norms.

Ultimately, Wonder Woman is a product of her time – a manifestation of the similarly ambiguous identity of American women during World War II. Right from the moment of her conception, Wonder Woman embodied the strange in-between position in which women during World War II found themselves, a position in which they both conformed to tradition at the same time that they challenged it. However, to fully understand Wonder Woman in her time, it is necessary to know what was happening in American society at the time of her conception – *the origin story behind her origin story*.

This chapter, which tells the backstory of Wonder Woman in mainstream popular culture, has two parts. The first part depicts the unique position of American women during World War II – a position in which they, like Wonder Woman, were able to conform to convention while simultaneously subverting it. While the war allowed women to enter traditionally male-dominated industries to replace the men who were serving overseas, the dramatic change in the composition of the workforce was not accompanied by a similar change in ideology. The second part of the story analyzes how this contradictory role was presented in the public eye through popular culture. The dominant public discourse, which pervaded every medium of popular culture at the time, stressed that women had been temporarily empowered because their country needed them in a time of crisis, but it was only “for the duration” of the war: women were expected to maintain their traditional femininity during the war, and once the men returned, retreat back to their prior roles in the domestic sphere.⁹



PART I: WORLD WAR II – A DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE

America felt the far-reaching effects of World War II in nearly every aspect of society – not the least of which was gender relations, norms and expectations. Usually, “changes in a

⁹ Hartmann, 23.

society's sex-gender system, the ways in which it distributes activities, roles and power between women and men, take place very gradually," historian Susan Hartmann argues, "Only rarely do significant alterations in patterns of living and thought occur within a span of a few years."¹⁰ World War II was one such rare event that spurred accelerated changes in the way that genders interacted with each other, primarily because it caused millions of American men to leave their place in society – their lives, jobs and families – to serve their country.

The most significant effect of World War II on American women was the opportunity for women's increased, but more importantly, *expanded* participation in the workforce. This was not wholly a new phenomenon; women's participation in the workforce had in fact been slowly but steadily increasing since the beginning of the century. In 1900, women comprised about 20 percent of the labor force,¹¹ a share that, over the next four decades, only increased about 7 percent to a little over a quarter (27.6) of the workforce on the eve of American involvement in the international conflict.¹² Despite female workers' gradually growing numbers (or perhaps the reason why the increase was so slow), there was a strong stigma attached to women working. Particularly during the Great Depression, when many households relied on the income brought in by female breadwinners, women faced "intensified discrimination."¹³ This discrimination was a backlash against the perceived erosion of the traditional family structure – people were postponing marriage and having fewer children, out of economic necessity.¹⁴ Economic depression bred social conservatism – what William Chafe deems "a wave of reaction against any change in woman's traditional role."¹⁵ Social conservatism led to the systemic discrimination of women. New Deal relief programs were tailored to benefit men. Legislation limited the employment of married women.¹⁶ "Government and the mass media joined in a

¹⁰ Ibid., ix.

¹¹ Thomas Weiss, "Workforce," in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, ed. Susan B. Carter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2-63 to 2-66.

¹² Hartmann, 21.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression* (New York: Macmillan Reference), s.v. "Family and Home, Impact of the Great Depression on."

¹⁵ Chafe, 121.

¹⁶ Ibid.

campaign urging women to refrain from taking jobs,” Chafe argues.¹⁷ And women, for the most part, listened.

If nothing else, the experience of women prior to World War II demonstrates the persistence, even in a time of crisis, of the traditional gender constructions as defined by the ideology of separate spheres, the belief system that influenced gender roles and expectations in society from the Victorian era onwards. Separate spheres ideology was based in the belief that men and women were naturally more inclined towards different kinds of work and thus should inhabit different spheres – women belonged in the private, domestic world of family, childcare and housekeeping, while men provided for the family in the public world of economy and governance.¹⁸ Women’s participation in the workplace in the first four decades of the twentieth century increased at this excruciatingly slow pace, and when women were actually employed, it continued to be only in certain industries deemed acceptable for women’s work – light manufacturing, service and clerical work – that had low wages, poor conditions and little chance for advancement.¹⁹ Female employment remained, during this period, to be dictated by “a dual labor system in the public sector [that] paralleled the sexual division of labor within the home.”²⁰

World War II, however, disrupted these trends. So many men left to serve that there was a labor shortage at a time when the government desperately needed (wo)manpower in durable goods industries that manufactured war products such as the skilled metal trades, small ammunition assembly, aircraft, and shipping industries.²¹ These industries, which had unions and high wages, had effectively barred women from entering before 1940, but due to the labor shortage, opened their doors to women during the war.²² In 1939, women represented only 8 percent of the laborers in the manufacture of durable goods. By 1944, women were 25 percent of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hartmann, 16.

¹⁹ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 20.

²⁰ Hartmann, 16.

²¹ Honey, 21.

²² Ibid.

these industries' workforce.²³ Between 1940 and 1945, about 6.6 million women entered the workforce, as their numbers surged from 11,970,000 prewar to 18,610,000 after the war - an increase of more than 50 percent.²⁴ Women's share of the civilian labor force increased almost the same amount (a little less than 10 percent) in four years (1941 – 1945) as it did in forty (1900 – 1940).

The disruption in the gendered status quo was extensive; although the most significant changes occurred in women's paid employment, women were leaving their traditional roles in other ways, too. A relatively small number of women (about 350,000) served in the military during the conflict, although it was in noncombat roles.²⁵ In the army, they served in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), which later was promoted to the Women's Army Corps (WAC). The women in the WAAC/WAC, called WAACs or WACs, served both at home and overseas. Their naval counterpart was Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), which was solely a stateside organization.²⁶ Women pilots also served in the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), where they were responsible for operating military aircrafts for non-active purposes, such as moving planes from factories to bases or transporting cargo, which allowed men to fly in active duty.²⁷ Overall, most women (about 60 percent) remained at home. Even when fulfilling their traditional roles in the 'private' realm of the home, however, housewives were assuming new 'public' responsibilities like rationing foodstuff or growing their own vegetable "victory gardens."²⁸ During World War II, American women lived in a society that allowed them to do more than they had ever been traditionally allowed to do. This liberal climate was suitable for the emergence of a popular superheroine.

Despite the dramatic changes women experienced during the war, particularly their expanded and increased participation in the workplace (and to a lesser degree, the military),

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hartmann, 21.

²⁵ "American Women in World War II", A+E Networks (accessed Dec. 20, 2014).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Caroline Cornell, "The Housewife's Battle on the Home Front: Women in World War II Advertisements," *The Forum: Cal Poly's Journal of History* 2, no. 1 (2010): 32-33.

persistent prewar gender ideologies survived by and large unscathed. As Hartmann eloquently writes, “The popular ideology that women’s primary role was in the home survived the war both in the dominant public discourse and in the beliefs of most women.”²⁹ How did contemporary discourse manage to reconcile the contradiction between women’s wartime reality in the workplace and their “proper place” in the home? This question begged for an answer, because, as Honey observes, “the fact that a woman could step into a man’s shoes and wear them rather comfortably posed an implicit challenge to traditional notions about femininity and female limitations.”³⁰ Was there a way to maintain the patriarchal structure of American society, while still addressing the need for women to take on new responsibilities to aid the war effort?

In short, yes. Dominant public discourse, or the way that that people talked about women’s new roles, empowered women to enter the workforce, certainly, but only “for the duration” of the war.³¹ The emphasis on the *temporary* nature of their employment and the patriotic rhetoric that stressed “stepping up,” in a time of national crisis, to aid the war effort while the men were gone allowed women to subvert conventional gender roles by working men’s jobs while ultimately not upsetting the beliefs upon which those roles were based. Women were still expected to maintain their traditional femininity throughout the war and were expected to give up their jobs once the war ended and men returned. It was these messages of temporary empowerment and the promise of a return to normalcy that were picked up and disseminated by contemporary mass media and popular culture.

PART II: POP CULTURE GOES TO WAR

World War II, more than any other war that preceded it, was fought in pop culture. This phenomenon is attributable to the rise of a mass media culture (across multiple mediums, like film, radio and magazines) combined with the magnitude of a global conflict that necessitated the complete mobilization of all of America’s resources and all of its citizens. This relationship

²⁹ Hartmann, 20.

³⁰ Honey, 1.

³¹ Hartmann, 23.

between the war effort and pop culture was recognized by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration in June 1942 with the establishment of the Office of War Information (OWI).³² The OWI was essentially the American propaganda machine, shaping the messages that the public received about the war; as such, much of their work was collaborating with the industries that were producing popular culture. Film was probably the most heavily scrutinized medium of all. The Bureau of Motion Pictures, which operated as part of the OWI, worked closely with Hollywood studios during the war to develop films that sent positive messages about America's involvement.³³

Comic books, too, fell under the extensive reach of the OWI through the War Writers' Board (WWB), which many comic book authors joined during the war.³⁴ Established in early 1942, the WWB was supposedly a private organization, but it received funding through the OWI to propagate support for policies favored by the government.³⁵ Although there is no evidence that Wonder Woman's writer, William Moulton Marston, was a member, (in fact, when Wonder Woman was created, the OWI did not even exist yet), the existence of the WWB establishes that the government was aware of the hold comic books had on the popular imagination and their potential in contributing to the wartime propaganda machine. Even without her creator being a member of the WWB, Wonder Woman, who fought for America against Nazi spies and sinister Japanese plots in her spar-spangled costume, espoused patriotism. Even though they had the WWB, comic books did not need a formal propaganda agency; they were very good at spreading propaganda on their own. With their fantastically exaggerated, dichotomous ("good v. evil") style and appeal to young audiences, including soldiers, they could not have been better designed to tote sensationalism and patriotism to the masses. World War II, though tragic and destructive for the rest of the world, was actually a building force for the fledging superhero comic book

³² Tawnya Adkins Covert, *Manipulating Images: World War II Mobilization of Women through Magazine Advertising* (Plymouth, United Kingdom Lexington Books 2011), 9.

³³ "Office of War Information and Bureau of Motion Pictures", Kennesaw State University's Museum of History & Holocaust Education (accessed Dec. 19, 2014).

³⁴ Cord A. Scott, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from WWII through Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis Naval Institute Press 2014).

³⁵ Paul Hirsch, "This Is Our Enemy": The Writers War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945," *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (August 2014): 451, 455.

industry.³⁶ What better evil for superheroes to battle than readymade, real villains that resonated strongly with all Americans – the Axis powers.³⁷

Pop culture during World War II, then, *mattered*. It was influenced by the wartime society in which it was produced, and it influenced the war effort as well. This process of give-and-take is typical of pop culture, from this tradeoff between “shaping” the public discourse and “being shaped by” the public discourse, to the reciprocity between producers of pop culture and consumers of pop culture. An oversimplified understanding of pop culture would see the relationship between producers and consumers as a one-way street; basically, the media brainwashes people and tells them what to think.³⁸ Producers are in a powerful position to shape (note that it is *shape*, not create) public opinion, but this explanation ignores the fact that producers must cater to what the audience wants to see; pop culture is different than other art forms in the sense that the producers are motivated for economic gain – they want to create something that will sell, so they pander to and reflect beliefs that are already popular. “The power of mass media...to persuade is limited by the already existing attitudes, values, experiences and needs of the consumer,” Honey argues. “Popular culture must, to some extent, reflect the assumptions, fantasies and values of consumers in order to be commercially successful.”³⁹ Producers of pop culture do not create something out of nothing. They may twist the message or manipulate it, but it is always based on something – a belief, a norm, an ideology – that is already in society.

Popular culture mediums, including comic books, have been generally accepted as historical sources, but it still seems apropos to further legitimize and advocate for the study of popular culture. The beauty of pop culture as a source of history is that it is not trying to be

³⁶ Wright, 42.

³⁷ Most superheroes did not actually serve with the military; comic book creators, such as Superman's Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, thought that Superman singlehandedly winning the war by using his superpowers would undermine the very real sacrifice of the soldiers. How did Superman avoid the draft? When he failed the army's eye exam because he accidentally used his X-ray vision to read the screen two examination rooms away. Instead, he mainly rallied support and defeated criminal plots on the homefront, similarly to Wonder Woman. See Superman biographer Larry Tye interviewed by Fresh Air's Terry Gross in "It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's A New Superman Bio!", NPR (accessed Dec. 21, 2014).

³⁸ Honey, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

history. It is not created for posterity – it is only trying to appeal to people then and there. Thus, it provides an unconscious glimpse into the dominant public discourse and the everyday life of a particular time period. “Popular culture is the Polaroid snapshot...that documents our lives in the social world; it is a backdrop of day-to-day life,” argue Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy.⁴⁰ It captures the values and traditions of the society in which it was created. Pop culture will never be able to tell what an individual man or woman felt or thought, but it can demonstrate in aggregate what appealed to them – their hopes, anxieties and feelings, which form the hopes, feelings and anxieties of the society’s population as a whole.

At this point, this chapter has covered what women were doing, what people were saying about it, and how popular culture influenced the war effort; this is the moment when these stories come together to show how women – Wonder Woman’s contemporaries – were represented in popular culture. A brief recap: The war significantly expanded what women were allowed to do in society – more women than ever entered the workforce (doing men’s work, no less), yet people coded women’s newly empowered roles as *temporary*, only “for the duration” of the war, as to not disturb longstanding ideas of traditional gender relations. This conversation about women’s expanded roles played out in how women were portrayed in wartime popular culture. By examining the quintessential World War II images of Rosie the Riveter and the pin-up girl, we see if Wonder Woman was, in actuality, ‘weird’ for her time.

Pop (Culture) Princesses: Depictions of American Woman During WWII

Underlying attitudes about gender are slow to change, but popular culture images can quickly adapt to public need.⁴¹ On the surface, the public images of women during World War II changed quickly in response to women’s new roles in the war effort, but closer examination will reveal the well-established beliefs underpinning these images belong to the persistent gender ideologies that were not shaken. Women were allowed to be empowered, but only temporarily. They could enter the workforce, but only because it was in support of their men. They could engage in traditionally masculine work, but they had to look and act like women while doing it.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy, "Rethinking Popular Culture and Media", Rethinking Schools.

⁴¹ Rupp, 4.

The American woman became the symbol of the traditional American way of life – a bastion worth protecting in the global conflict.

Rosie the Riveter (the working woman) and the pin-up girl (the hyper-feminine or sexual “girl back home”) represent the extremes of this contradictory treatment of women by World War II popular culture. By looking at these two icons and examining how they reflected the dominant public discourse, we can better understand where Wonder Woman fits in her time and thus how she became popular.

Rosie the Riveter: Patriotism and Propaganda

*“All the day long, whether rain or shine
She's a part of the assembly line
She's making history, working for victory
Rosie the riveter!”*

– Kay Kyser, “Rosie the Riveter,” 1943⁴²

Perhaps the most iconic image of an American woman in World War II pop culture, Rosie the Riveter can trace her origins of her name back to Kay Kyser’s 1943 release of the song aptly titled, “Rosie the Riveter.”⁴³ The song, which praised the spirit and work ethic of Rosie, a female munitions worker, was a nationwide hit. Rosie skyrocketed to stardom when artist Norman Rockwell brought her to life in his cover art for the Memorial Day issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943. Rockwell’s illustration, however, is not the one typically associated with Rosie. The famous “We Can Do It!” poster, which was only named Rosie the Riveter years after the war, actually predates Kyser’s song and Rockwell’s cover art.⁴⁴ In 1942, graphic artist J. Howard Miller was commissioned by the Westinghouse Electric Company to create a poster that would raise the morale of its workers. What he came up with was the familiar blue-collared-shirt-and-red-polka-dot-bandana-wearing woman flexing her bicep with determination.⁴⁵

⁴² Red Evans and John Jacob Loeb, “Rosie the Riveter,” (1942).

⁴³ “Rosie the Riveter”, A+E Networks (accessed Nov. 15 2014).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

The female war worker in J. Howard Miller's 1942 poster originally had no name; she was actually only retroactively identified as "Rosie" decades after the war when her image was appropriated by the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s after there were copyright issues with using Rockwell's cover art.⁴⁶ Rosie's postwar legacy is similar to Wonder Woman's; both icons were adopted by the feminist movement in the 1970s as a role model of female empowerment. Gloria Steinem, leader of the 1970s feminist movement, has often cited Wonder Woman, who she read as a child, as a role model.⁴⁷ Wonder Woman's merits as a feminist are something that we will return to in later chapters, but for right now, the similar legacy of appropriation of the two characters for the feminist movement suggests that both pop culture icons were sending out similar messages about women's empowerment and ability to take on new roles, whether it be working in factories or saving the world.

This image of the female war worker, however, is less empowering than the postwar, feminist reimagining of Rosie suggests. During World War II, she was created to counter the stigma attached to women working, which was rooted in the prewar separate spheres ideology and sexual division of labor. Because of these deeply ingrained beliefs, when America entered the war, employers were extremely reluctant to hire women (despite labor shortages), and women were equally reluctant to be hired, fearing "that factory work was too heavy or dirty for them to do...or [that] taking a job would jeopardize their husbands' draft status."⁴⁸ There were also concerns about the relationship between female empowerment and lesbianism, a claim that would haunt Wonder Woman as well.⁴⁹

To combat the reluctance of both employers and potential female employees, the government launched propaganda campaigns in a variety of pop culture mediums to promote the image of women as workers. The "Rosie" image was carefully controlled, however, to not threaten existing gender roles. To accomplish this goal, the quintessential female war worker as depicted

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Laura Wolff Scanlan, "Super Role Model," *Humanities* July/August 2013.

⁴⁸ Anderson, 23.

⁴⁹ Donna B. Knaff, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter: Women of World War II in American Popular Graphic Art* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

in the propaganda was “young, white and middle class.”⁵⁰ As Honey argues, “The predominant media portrayal of women war workers was...that they entered the labor force out of patriotic motives and eagerly left to start families and resume full-time housemaking.”⁵¹ The propaganda stressed the temporariness of women’s participation in the workplace and emphasized the connection between their war work and their normal roles as supportive mothers and wives who were only trying to bring their husbands home faster and make the world safer for their children.⁵² As Rupp articulates, this spin on the reality “allowed the public to accept the participation of women in unusual jobs without challenging basic beliefs about women’s roles.”⁵³

Out of economic and military necessity, Rosie was accepted into the mainstream and the public consciousness. While this was due in part to the government propaganda campaign, the campaign would not have been successful at influencing public opinion had it had deviated too far from preexisting gender roles. As the war progressed, the “Rosie” image diffused into many mediums of pop culture. Government propaganda campaigns encouraged woman go to work, regularly framing it as needed to bring an end to the war and a return to normalcy faster. One poster featuring a woman working on an airplane cockpit was captioned, “The more women at work, the sooner we win!” Another featured a female worker looking wistfully at a soldier in the distance; underneath her, “‘The girl he left behind’ is still behind him. She’s a WOW (Woman Ordinance Worker).” A government propaganda film from 1943 emphasized the fleeting nature of women’s foray into the workplace by assuring viewers that she was a good worker because of the skills she had learned her proper, domestic sphere, to which she would return.⁵⁴ From Kyser’s hit song on the radio airwaves to photojournalistic exposés and workplace romances in magazines such as *LIFE*, *The Saturday*

⁵⁰ Honey, 19.

⁵¹ This did not reflect the reality of the demographics of wartime female workers, which were, according to Honey, “working-class wives, widows, divorcees, and students who needed the money to achieve a reasonable standard of living.” See *ibid.*

⁵² Hartmann, 23.

⁵³ Leila Rupp, as quoted in Anderson, 10.

⁵⁴ United States Government, 1943. “Manpower,” Periscope Film. Film, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKrHfTGWxQ4> (accessed Nov. 15, 2014).

Evening Post and *True Story*, the Rosie image diffused throughout popular culture and into the public subconscious.^{55 56}

The empowerment of women was, as has been stressed, limited. The most problematic constraint placed upon it was they were still expected to look like and act like women while performing men's work. Rebecca Winson wrote of this double standard:

J. Howard Miller...took inspiration from tired, oil-covered workers but washed them down and dolled them up to produce his Rosie. Miller never intended his creation to be a symbol of female empowerment – she was used to encourage women to take up jobs in factories as part of their patriotic duty to the war effort. His propaganda conveniently ignored the fact that women would have been expected to carry on with the housework once they got in, and then, after a war spent being paid nearly 50% less than their male colleagues, would be sacked.⁵⁷

With the notable outlier of Norman Rockwell's Rosie, all of these empowered "Rosies" were stereotypically pretty, white women who wore makeup, maintained pin curls and accessorized with bandanas. Hartmann argues that the expectation that "women would retain their 'femininity' even as they performed masculine duties" was an example of the way "the public discourse on women's new wartime roles established...conditions on social changes."⁵⁸ She writes, "Photographs of women war workers emphasized glamour, and advertising copy assured readers that beneath the overalls and grease stains there remained a true woman, feminine in appearance and behavior."⁵⁹

The emphasis on maintaining a feminine appearance is a strong connection between Rosie the Riveter and her counterpart, the pin-up girl, who is the ultra-feminine "girly girl" to Rosie the Riveter's "tomboy." However, even at the "rougher" end of the popular culture representations of women, Rosie was still attractive and adhered to the conventional beauty standards of the 1940s, which made her look similar to the pin-up girl. While they appear to deliver conflicting messages to American women about their wartime identity (patriotic war worker versus sex symbol), the two characters happily coexisted in pop culture during this period, an indication that

⁵⁵ Margaret Bourke-White, "Women In Steel," *LIFE Magazine* Aug. 9, 1943

⁵⁶ Honey, 14.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Winson, "Sorry Beyoncé, Rosie the Riveter is no feminist icon. Here's why," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2014.

⁵⁸ Hartmann, 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

both Rosie and the pin-up girl are rooted in the same dominant public discourse surrounding women's role in society.

The "Girl Back Home": Betty Grable and the Varga Girls

"I'm strictly an enlisted man's girl."
– Betty Grable⁶⁰

When actress Betty Grable married big band leader Harry James in July 1943,⁶¹ millions of GIs were devastated. With blonde hair, blue eyes, and a pair of "million dollar" legs,⁶² she was the celebrity crush of millions of servicemen overseas – a sentiment vocalized in the popular song of that year, "I Want To Marry A Girl Just Like The Girl That Married Harry James."⁶³

While she starred in many successful films during the war, the main source of Grable's popularity, particularly among the soldiers, was as a pin-up girl. "Pin-up girl" was a term coined in the July 7, 1941 issue of *LIFE* magazine to describe the beautiful women with red-lipped smiles and sexy poses in the photographs that GIs "pinned up" in the cockpits of airplanes or in their barracks.⁶⁴ The most recognizable pin-up girls were Hollywood actresses like Grable, Rita Hayworth, Dottie Lamour and Ava Gardner, although the unnamed models in the work of pin-up artist Alberto Vargas for *Esquire* magazine - the so-called "Varga girls" - were also wildly popular among the soldiers.⁶⁵

The popularity of pin-ups, in and of itself, says a lot about how women were viewed during the war and what their role was in the war effort. Compared to World War I, when American men snuck clandestine glances at semi-nude women on 'dirty French postcards,' pin-up girls were allowed by the government, even encouraged, for their morale boosting effect.⁶⁶ The images were displayed in public, even proudly painted onto tanks and on the noses of

⁶⁰ As quoted in John Stanchak, "From Hollywood With Love" (accessed Nov. 15 2014).

⁶¹ Robert B. Westbrook, "I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James": American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Dec. 1990): 613.

⁶² No, literally. In 1943, Twentieth Century Fox ensured the actress's legs, widely recognized as her best physical assets, for a million dollars. *The Home Front Encyclopedia: United States, Britain, and Canada in World Wars I and II* (ABC-CLIO, 2007), s.v. "Grable, Betty."

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Pin-up Grrrls : Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press), 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁶ Gary L. Bloomfield and Stacie L. Shain, *Duty, Honor, Applause: America's Entertainers in World War II* (Globe Pequot Press, 2004), 401.

military planes.⁶⁷ Twentieth Century Fox reportedly sent five million copies of Betty Grable's iconic 1943 bathing suit photo, taken from the back as she peeks at the viewer over her shoulder, to GIs, making her the most ubiquitous and widely circulated pin-up girl of them all.⁶⁸

Betty Grable received a great deal of fan mail from her admirers, frequently upwards of 10,000 per week.⁶⁹ In one letter, a soldier told Grable that in the midst of the violence of the war, her image would remind the men "what we were fighting for."⁷⁰ The soldier hints that Betty Grable represents something greater than her sex appeal, something that historian Richard Westbrook later argues is "an appeal to go to war to defend *private* interests and discharge *private* obligations."⁷¹ (This, of course, is opposed to *political* obligations to fight, such as defending freedom and democracy.⁷²) In more romantic terms, Westbrook is essentially claiming that the attractive, hyper-feminine pin-up girls such as Grable reminded soldiers of the good, sweet all-American girl on the other side of the Atlantic, waiting for their return.

Westbrook's argument presents the pin-up girl as an overcompensating reaction in popular culture – an over-the-top feminine image to counteract the limited progressiveness of Rosie the Riveter crossing into masculine territories. This is especially clear in the way that the men overseas consumed the pin-up girl image. As Doug Warren writes, "Betty was a representation of the *girl back home* for thousands of homesick young lads...It was more than the sexy picture that enamored them of her; there was a magical wholesomeness and substance they saw beyond the curves of her figures."⁷³ The "girl back home" was a symbol that represented the American way of life and the families they had left behind; she was their wives, girlfriends,

⁶⁷ Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," 601.

⁶⁸ Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (Free Press, 2004), 98.

⁶⁹ Erin Knight, "Betty Grable: 'The Girl With The Million Dollar Legs'", Mount Holyoke (accessed Nov. 15, 2014 2014).

⁷⁰ Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II."

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Doug Warren as quoted in Knight.

mothers, sisters and daughters.⁷⁴ With gender relations in a state of flux, (Men were gone! Women were working in factories!), Grable's played-up femininity swung the pendulum far in the opposite direction. The "girl back home" sweetheart was a pervasive stereotype that extended beyond wrinkled pictures pinned up in European trenches to a variety of different mediums during World War II. Propaganda campaigns and magazine advertisements capitalized on this narrative, stressing all the things (besides working) that the housewives (the ultimate "girls back home") could do to aid the war effort to bring their men home faster, like rationing, salvaging, growing "victory gardens," and buying war bonds.⁷⁵

Not every pin-up girl was as "wholesome" as Betty Grable. She was sexy, but not too sexy, a type of demure sexuality. Hyper-femininity could easily cross over into the "aggressive sexuality" for which the Varga girls were known.⁷⁶ As art historian Maria Elena Buszek argued:

Varga Girl's hypersexual physique and prosaic innuendo shaped her into a creature whose sexuality tended to be more than a little fearsome...Although there was the occasional 'girl next door' type--caught in mundane domestic acts of yard work or dressing, looking on in a moment of dreamy repose--in image and prose, the Varga Girls were remarkably aggressive about their sexual desires and prowess.

The November 1942 centerfold of *Esquire* demonstrates this aggressive sexuality. Clad in only a white slip, reclining on a pink dressing-room ottoman pouf, she flicked a riding crop over her head with a sly, sexy smile. The caption, too, is rather eyebrow raising in terms of gender relations, especially the suggestiveness of the last line:

...This little cactus cutie
Will be proud to do her duty
And she'll wear his pants until he wins the war....
Then with hearts in sweet communion
They will stage a union
And I bet she wears the pants forevermore!⁷⁷

While this centerfold and her little ditty are more overtly sexual and potentially more threatening to the gendered status quo than wholesome Grable, there is clearly a commonality

⁷⁴ This is why Grable's popularity actually increased after she married and became a mother. She even further epitomized the model American woman. See Westbrook, "I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James": American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," 600.

⁷⁵ Cornell, "The Housewife's Battle on the Home Front: Women in World War II Advertisements," 28.

⁷⁶ Maria Elena Buszek, "Of Vargas Girls and Riot Grrrls: The Varga Girl and WWII in the Pin-up's Feminist History", Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (accessed Dec. 21, 2014).

⁷⁷ Alberto Varga, 1942. "Beauts and Saddles," *Esquire*.

between the two. Her powerful sexuality is tamed by the fact that she still fit the stereotype of the “girl back home,” faithfully waiting for her soldier to return home. The poem also features an allusion to the narrative of women’s temporary empowerment. The Varga girls, according to Buszek’s feminist reinterpretation of the pin-up, are “powerful, productive women in professions and military, whose beauty and bravery resulted in large part from their very entrance into those spheres.”⁷⁸ This centerfold, who just stripped off her cowboy hat and boots, does indeed have a job, but she is only filling in for her cowboy’s duties “until his wins the war” and returns home.

There was a line between the innocent sexuality – not even sexuality, more like hyper-femininity – of Betty Grable and the provocative sexuality of the Varga girls. It was a fine line, and Wonder Woman herself skirted the edge. She espoused the virtues of goodness and love that Grable exudes. She devoted herself wholly to the American cause in the war. However, she definitely had that edge of a Varga girl. Her weapon of choice, her magic, golden lasso, which will be discussed far more in depth in later chapters, often had the same kind of connotations of sexual domination attached to it that the Varga girl’s whip has in the November 1942 centerfold. In 1943, the U.S. Post Office took *Esquire* to Court, threatening to rescind its second-class mailing status because it contained content of an “obscene, lewd and lascivious character.”⁷⁹ The Varga girls were singled out as particularly offensive.

Besides relegating women to a mere supportive role, the pin-up girl also held women to a narrow standard of beauty. She had a very specific body type – an hourglass figure with a tiny waist and curves in all the right places. Vargas, in particular, took great liberty with realistic proportions in his renderings of pin-ups girls.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the pin-up girl’s beauty had implicit racial barriers – Grable, the Varga girls, and almost every other pin-up girl had flawless, porcelain white skin. As the pin-up girl represented the quintessential all-American woman to the men overseas, it constructed an American femininity that equated Americanness with whiteness. Wonder Woman, who is also white, perpetuates the same fallacy.

⁷⁸ Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls : Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*, 185.

⁷⁹ Frank Walker, as quoted in Yellin, 96.

⁸⁰ Buszek, "Of Vargas Girls and Riot Grrrls: The Varga Girl and WWII in the Pin-up's Feminist History".

Grable understood her position as a role model in this narrative and advocated for women to emulate her. Woman's role in the war effort, according to Grable, was to adoringly support their men - a total reinforcement of traditional, submissive role of women. On pleasing men, Grable advises in an interview with *LIFE* magazine, "Remember to follow their lead, from dancing to conversation. Talk about *them*. The most popular girls at the Hollywood Canteen, for instance, are the really good listeners; the ones who hang onto a man's words."⁸¹ She inspired and encouraged girls to take their own pin up photos to send to men serving overseas, in which they dressed and posed like her.⁸² While this encouraged women to conform to their subservient role in the war effort, where their value was their superficial appearance, it also inspired women to take control of their sex appeal in an unprecedentedly public manner. Women taking control of their own lives – that is something that even Wonder Woman could get behind.

Wonder Woman's appearance echoes that of the pin-up girl, especially her costume. William Moulton Marston was very involved in the creative process of designing Wonder Woman. An early sketch of Wonder Woman by artist H.G. Peter shows notes by Marston, commenting that the girl was "very cute," approving of her "skirt, legs and hair," but vetoing her sandals in favor of boots.⁸³ Jill Lepore argues that somewhere along the line of designing Wonder Woman, Marston clearly suggested to artist H.G. Peter that Wonder Woman should look more like a pin-up – like a Varga girl. The Varga girl, Lepore writes, "wore her hair down, her nails polished, her legs bare, and barely any more clothing than what a swimsuit covers. Wonder Woman, with her kinky boots, looks as though she could have seen on a page of *Esquire's* annual pin-up calendar."⁸⁴ Indeed, her costume, which evolved from Peter's early crop top and flowy mini-skirt combination to a much more lingerie-looking low-cut, low-back bustier with a pair of high-waisted hot pants would have looked right at home pinned up in the cockpit of a fighter plane. The pin-up influence was slightly mitigated by

⁸¹ Ibid.; LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement For All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 278.

⁸² Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," 605.

⁸³ Lepore, 197.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

H.G. Peter's artistic style – flat, with “wood-cut like delineation”⁸⁵ – a far cry from Vargas' airbrushed, watercolor beauties. However much she looked like a pin-up girl, Wonder Woman did not carry herself like one. She was always running, jumping or lifting impossibly heavy objects; she was never coy and never threw “come hither” glances in Steve Trevor's direction. She was too busy saving the world.

SO WAS WONDER WOMAN REALLY A WONDER?

This is the moment in time – the snapshot of pop culture – that Wonder Woman entered, a complicated world filled with temporarily empowered Rosie the Riveters and wholesome yet suggestive pin-up girls like Betty Grable and the Varga girls. The two main stereotypes of World War II pop culture not only contradicted each other, but also were contradictory in and of themselves. The conflicting messages were a reflection of the dominant public discourse at a time when American society tried to reconcile the realities of a war with the persistent gender ideology of separate spheres.

Entering into this “conversation,” is Wonder Woman really that radically different? She, too, was a mess of happily coexisting contradictions. Strong as a man, but beautiful as a woman, Wonder Woman encourages women to escape man's domination, yet she herself falls in love with and pines after literally the first man she ever lays eyes on – a rather chauvinistic one at that. She is amazingly fast and intelligent, yet manages to get tied up, often by her own lasso, almost once every issue. She shares compelling ties to the key stereotypical depictions of women during World War II; she acts like Rosie and looks like a Varga girl. In many ways, Wonder Woman was simply another product of her time. Herein lies the key to explaining her popularity; while she seemed completely out of the ordinary, she in fact had roots in the contemporary popular culture.

However, there was another strong influence in Wonder Woman's development that has yet to be considered. While producers of pop culture make what people will buy, that does not mean that they always just regurgitate exactly what everyone else has done. No one can describe

⁸⁵ Jim Amash, as quoted in William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, *Wonder Woman Archives* vol. 5 (New York DC Comics, 2007), 7.

Wonder Woman as a regurgitation of stale ideas. There was definitely still a factor that made her radical that cannot solely be attributed to the limited progressiveness of wartime society. Once in a while, a visionary comes along and manipulates the dominant narrative, infusing it with new ideas. For Wonder Woman, that visionary was her creator, William Moulton Marston.

Chapter 2

The Man Behind Wonder Woman

“PAY ATTENTION TO THAT MAN BEHIND THE SUPERHEROINE!”

There is a scene in the classic musical film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in which Dorothy and her friends finally meet the Great and Powerful Oz, a massive and terrifying floating head surrounded by intermittent bursts of flame, only to discover that “Oz” is nothing more than an old man speaking into a microphone and operating machinery behind a curtain. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” the man says into the microphone, and the words come out of Oz’s mouth. William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, is like Oz – the man behind the superheroine, rather than the curtain. The only difference is that Marston *desperately* wanted everyone to pay attention to him and recognize him as great, be it through his insistence that he “invented” the lie detector or his highly publicized psychoanalysis of blondes versus brunettes. Brilliant but hugely self-important, Marston worked his way through a myriad of careers in law, psychology and entertainment with tepid success but loud boasting. Despite his desire to be in the public eye (or perhaps because of it) his work – and his unusual personal life – were shrouded in smoke and mirrors. His longest standing profession – longer than lawyer, psychologist, professor, movie consultant or even comic book writer – was showman.

From his birth in Cliftondale, Massachusetts, in 1893, it was clear that Marston was gifted; success always came easily to him. He did not believe that life without accomplishment was worth living, and should that have happened, he was actually prepared, as a young man, to end his life – the mark of someone who put great stock in public perception.¹ Like the comic book character that would be his legacy, Marston too was a figure of contradictions. An imposter or an inventor, a shameless celebrity or a serious scholar, a public figure or a hidden polyamorous husband – somehow he seemed to embody it all.

Wonder Woman was Marston's *piece de resistance*, the unintentional culmination of the eclectic mix of his life's work and his own unusual beliefs. His background in psychology, specifically his work in emotions and truth telling, as well as the women in his own life, inspired Marston's unique brand of feminism expressed through Wonder Woman. To understand the extent to which Marston imbued Wonder Woman with his own life experiences, this chapter will be divided into three sections. The first details his contributions to the field of psychology and how his theories connect with Wonder Woman, the second deals with how Wonder Woman reflects his relationships with and his beliefs about women, and the third tells the story of how he more or less fell into comic book writing. While the first chapter explained how Wonder Woman was normal product of her time, this chapter explains how she was a product of Marston's unusual imagination.



PART I: DR. PSYCHO'S PSYCHOLOGY

The Lie Detecting Lasso

In 1918, William Moulton Marston earned his law degree from Harvard College, where he also had also earned his undergraduate degree three years prior.² Though studying law had

¹ Lepore, 4-5.

² Rachel Wiegardt-Egel, "A Biography of William Marston, Creator of Wonder Woman ", Marin Theatre Company (accessed Dec. 24, 2014).

always been his intent,³ by the time he received his degree, it had become a side interest compared to his newly discovered scholarly passion – psychology. He began working for German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg in 1912, assisting in his experiments that tried to identify when people were lying.⁴

Münsterberg was extremely influential on collegiate Marston. He introduced Marston to the psychological study of deception, which Marston continued, despite Münsterberg's fall from favor; the German psychologist was disgraced around the same time that Marston began working with him. In 1907, Münsterberg's attempt to use psychoanalysis to detect deception in the recanted confession of murderer Harry Orchard failed spectacularly and publicly. This embarrassment ruined him, but his disrepute was also due to his unpopular beliefs in light of World War I – "his fidelity to Germany, despite its growing militarism and...his criticism of the United States as a nation suffering from an excess of equality."⁵

Marston and Münsterberg diverged on the subject of women. Münsterberg was particularly disparaging of women's equality. He wrote of women's suffrage, "Full privileges...would remain a dead letter for the overwhelming majority of women. The average woman does not wish to go into politics."⁶ She, of course, has far too many responsibilities at home to be "eager to take on new responsibilities at the ballot-box."⁷ Marston disagreed vehemently, and so did Wonder Woman. Jill Lepore makes a compelling argument that Dr. Münsterberg inspired Marston to create one of Wonder Woman's greatest foes, Dr. Psycho, an evil, misogynistic professor of psychology, who wants "to change the independent status of modern American women back to the days of the sultans and slave markets, clanking chains and abject captivity."⁸

When Marston began his graduate studies in both law and psychology in 1915, he resumed Münsterberg's work in the detection of deception. In order to understand Marston's

³ Lepore, 6.

⁴ Katha Politt, "Wonder Woman's Kinky Feminist Roots," *The Atlantic* Oct. 14, 2014.

⁵ Lepore, 32.

⁶ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Americans* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1904), 573-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 5," 36.

character, the influence of his psychological work on Wonder Woman and the relationship between his psychological work and his views on women, it is necessary to start with his work with lie detection. At this time, Marston developed a method called the systolic blood pressure test, an idea that he got from his wife, Elizabeth Holloway, who told her husband that her blood pressure seemed to rise anytime she was mad or excited, which led Marston to hypothesize that liars may experience a similar “internal excitement” in response to lying.⁹ Marston published his findings in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 1917.^{10 11} The systolic blood pressure test was a *predecessor* to the lie detector, invented in 1921, which used blood pressure, as well as other indicators, such as pulse and breathing, to detect liars.¹² There were also questions raised about the validity of the results of lie detectors. “The device may successfully detect an emotional response but can’t determine what causes it,” writes Les Daniels. “Some people experience anxiety just because they’re strapped in, while others are agitated by any question that seems to place their integrity in question.”^{13 14}

Marston, ever the showman who loved his systolic blood pressure test almost as much as he loved the spotlight, reacted in the face of the criticism of his systolic blood pressure test in a manner very typical of how he operated his entire life – he simply completely ignored it and continued to trumpet his own version of the truth, in this case, the lie detector’s infallibility and his claim as its inventor. He toted *his* test as *the* lie detector – *his* lie detector – and generated the

⁹ Committee to Review the Scientific Evidence on the Polygraph, “The Polygraph and Lie Detection,” (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003). http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=10420; William Moulton Marston, “Systolic Blood Pressure Symptoms of Deception,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 2, no. 2 (April 1917): 117.

¹⁰ Marston, “Systolic Blood Pressure Symptoms of Deception,” 117

¹¹ Holloway, despite her collaboration on her husband’s work, is not listed as a contributor. Neglecting his wife’s contribution was not the only time that Marston glossed over the truth (a certain irony for someone who worked in detecting lies). See Polygraph.

¹² Geoff Bunn, “The Curious Story of How the Lie Detector Came To Be,” *BBC News Magazine*, May 21, 2013.

¹³ Daniels and Kidd, 13.

¹⁴ Lie detectors continued to be viewed as unreliable long after Marston's death. In 1986, when Aldrich Ames, a CIA mole for the Soviet Union during the Cold War, had to take a routine lie detector test, the advice from his KGB handlers was “get a good night’s sleep, and try to relax in the interview.” He passed not once, but twice (again in 1991). See Ian Leslie, *Born Liars: Why We Can't Live Without Deceit* (London: Quercus, 2011), 128.

publicity to make it believable, “despite accumulated scientific evidence that it is not completely reliable.”¹⁵

Marston published his book, *The Lie Detector Test* in 1938, “much of [which] is devoted to asserting Marston’s claim to having found the science of deception.”¹⁶ In it, among other things, he discusses his attempt to use his lie detector in the historic 1923 case *Frye v. United States*. *Frye* was one of the many moments where Marston finds himself at the center of significant events of the twentieth century, in this case, a landmark ruling on the admissibility of scientific testimony. Much like Dr. Münsterberg’s work with Harry Orchard, Marston worked extensively with James Frye, a confessed murderer who recanted his confession. After testing Frye, Marston thought that he was telling the truth. Frye, however, was convicted, and the lie detector evidence was thrown out. The D.C. Court of Appeals’ reasoning for throwing out Marston’s testimony, as well as strengthening Marston’s image as a quack doctor, established the famous *Frye* standard for admissibility of scientific evidence, stating that lie detection had not been “sufficiently established to have gained general acceptance.”¹⁷ It was a stunning failure (like Münsterberg’s attempt), but in his book, however, Marston paints the *Frye* case as a successful first step towards the lie detector’s further use in courtrooms.¹⁸

Marston thought the Federal Bureau of Investigation could use his invention as well, and his publisher had a copy of *The Lie Detector Test* sent to J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Bureau. The Bureau was not interested. Quinn Tamm of the Bureau’s Technical Laboratory reviewed the book, and in a memo dated May 11, 1938, he concluded:

The book is typical of all the work done by Doctor Marston in that it is written in an extremely egotistical vein and that the sole purpose of the book seems to be to establish the fact that Doctor Marston was the first to use the blood pressure test in the detection of deception.¹⁹

¹⁵ Daniels and Kidd, 16.

¹⁶ Lepore, 162.

¹⁷ *Frye v. United States*, 54, (Court of Appeals of District of Columbia 1923).

¹⁸ Lepore, 163.

¹⁹ E.P. Coffey, *Memorandum for Mr. Natean. Re: Review of the Book Entitled Lie Detector Test by Doctor Marston* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1938).

On many occasions, Dr. Marston shamelessly used popular culture as a vehicle of self-promotion, and his publicity stunts for *The Lie Detector* are exemplars of this. In November 1938, a Gillette advertisement, which called Marston the “originator of the famous Lie Detector,” featured him running “scientific shaving tests” with his lie detector that concluded – unsurprisingly – that Gillette razors are the most preferred brand among men.²⁰

Marston also thought that his lie detector had applications in solving marital and romantic problems; in December of the same year, he appeared in a photostory in *Look*, a popular magazine, administering “love detector” tests to couples. *Look* reported that using his lie detector, Marston saved the marriage of “the neglected wife and the roving husband”²¹ by discovering that they still loved each other, and he united a pair of childhood friends, “the boy and the girl who were in love, but engaged to others.”²² Marston operated with the “fake it ‘til you make it” mentality, except he sincerely believed he was not faking it. It was as if he thought that if he talked it up enough, made the public believe that the lie detector worked and was extremely important, then perhaps people would think it was as true as he thought it was.

The theme of deception and the lie detector appear frequently throughout the Amazon superheroine’s adventures. One of her first foes, the Duke of Deception (one of the minions of the evil god of war, Mars) runs a “lie factory where hundreds of slaves work day and night writing plots, deceptions of false propaganda, fake publicity and personality camouflage.”²³ The Duke also uses phantasms (basically empty bodies) to impersonate people, a superpower he shares with Dr. Psycho, who can also take the form of anyone he wants.

²⁰ Gillette, *Lie Detector 'Tells All'* Advertisement, LIFE Magazine.

²¹ “Would You Dare Take These Tests?,” *Look*, Dec. 6, 1938, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ Marston and Peter, “Wonder Woman No. 2,” 39.

In many storylines, U.S. Army Intelligence, where Wonder Woman's alter ego Diana Prince works, tests truthfulness with a lie detector test.²⁴ In *Wonder Woman No. 4*, Steve Trevor and Diana Prince administer a lie detector test to Elva Dove, an Army Intelligence clerk who was accused of stealing a confidential report on rubber production for the war. She denies this accusation. Steve Trevor exclaims, "Another lie – by the great horned toad! This girl's guilty!"²⁵ In *Sensation Comics No. 20*, the *Wonder Woman* comics become another vehicle of Marston's self-promotion when a WAAC is suspected of an assassination attempt of a general. Diana Prince gives her a lie detector, making direct allusion to Marston's work – Diana "studies her blood pressure record carefully!"²⁶ When someone planted a bomb at Army Intelligence's headquarters in *Sensation Comics No. 15*, Steve Trevor administers lie detector tests to the entire staff.²⁷

The strongest allusion to the lie detector comes from Wonder Woman herself. On Reform Island, the Amazonian prison, the Amazons make use of a more fantastical version of the lie detector, the brain wave detector, which "records your true thoughts!"²⁸ Most famously, however, Wonder Woman's weapon of choice, her golden lasso of truth, which was called the "magic lasso" in the Golden Age *Wonder Woman* comics, is a direct reference to the lie detector. Crafted from "unbreakable...tiny golden links"²⁹ that were taken from Aphrodite's magic girdle, worn by the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta, the lasso compels anyone captured with it to obey and tell the truth. "Like the equally

²⁴ The army did, in fact, use lie detectors in criminal proceedings during World War II, but doubtfully as often and as credulously as they do in *Wonder Woman*. See Ken Alder, *The Lie Detectors: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 218; The New York Times reported that the military used lie detector tests during World War II to screen candidates for the Manhattan Project. See "Pro and Con: Use and Abuse of Lie-Detector Tests; Pentagon Screen Program Sets Off Some Alarms," *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1985.

²⁵ One of many Steve Trevor's many nonsensical exclamations. William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1943), 204.

²⁶ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 20," 84.

²⁷ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 15" in *Wonder Woman Archives*(New York: DC Comics, 1943), 149.

²⁸ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3," in *Wonder Woman Archives*(New York: DC Comics, 1943), 111.

²⁹ Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 1*, 14.

mythic lie detector upon which it was modeled, the lasso was intended to be one of Wonder Woman's principal weapons against the forces of crime and injustice," writes Geoffrey Bunn.³⁰ Wonder Woman uses it frequently to save the day – for instance, in *Wonder Woman No. 3*, she compels a German prison guard to lead her to the location of Baroness Paula Von Gunther's daughter, Gerta, who had been kidnapped by the Nazis.³¹ Almost as often as she saves the day with the lasso, she finds herself captured with it, a phenomenon that will be discussed in great detail in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to know that the lasso showed that Marston recognized "the lie detector's dual qualities as an instrument of liberation and domination."³² The truth may set you free, but golden lasso inevitably subjugated its subjects to its power, foreshadowing Marston's obsession with the psychology of domination/subjugation.

I Get So Emotional, Baby

In 1928, Marston pulled off another publicity stunt for his psychology research at the Embassy Theatre in New York City. The experiment was to demonstrate the differences between emotional responses of blondes, brunettes and redheads. He strapped the female participants (chorus girls from Broadway) to equipment that would measure their blood pressure and respiration, showed them emotional clips from movies and gauged their reactions. On January 31, the New York Times reported,

By elaborate and allegedly delicate instruments...by charts and graphs, and by the simpler expedient of holding hands, Dr. William Marston, a lecturer on psychology at Columbia University, proved yesterday in the presence of a staff of coy press agents, camera men, motion picture operators and columnists that brunettes react far more violently to amatory stimuli than blondes.³³

Dr. Marston believed that "the experiments more or less proved...that brunettes enjoyed the thrill of pursuit while blondes preferred the more passive enjoyment of being kissed."³⁴ His conclusions exploited female stereotypes, something that appears in the Golden Age Wonder

³⁰ Geoffrey C. Bunn, "The Lie Detector, Wonder Woman and Liberty: The Life and Work of William Moulton Marston," *History of Human Sciences* 10, no. 1 (1997): 185.

³¹ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3."

³² Bunn, "The Lie Detector, Wonder Woman and Liberty: The Life and Work of William Moulton Marston," 185.

³³ "Blondes Lose Out in Film Love Test," *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1928.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Woman comics as well, suggesting that despite his progressive attitudes towards women, he was still a man of his time.

This episode demonstrates not only Marston's love affair with celebrity, but also his interest in the psychology of emotion, specifically with a focus on women. Besides his work leading to the lie detector, his other contribution to the field of psychology was DISC theory, which is still in use today. It is from DISC theory that Marston developed his ideas about female supremacy, which appears explicitly in the *Wonder Woman* comics. Marston explains his theory in his book, *Emotions of Normal People*, published the same year as the show at the Embassy Theatre. DISC is an acronym that stood for four categories of human interaction: dominance, influence, submission and compliance. These four categories labeled people's personalities based on how they react – active or passive – in favorable or antagonistic situations. In an antagonistic situation, the active person in the relationship was *dominant*, and the passive person was forced to be *compliant*. In a favorable situation, the active person lovingly *influences* the passive person to willingly *submit*.³⁵ As Tim Hanley surmises, "Harsh compliance led to forced compliance, while kind inducement led to willing submission."³⁶

Marston used his DISC theory to explain gender relations. He believed men gravitated towards dominance, thus forcing an antagonistic situation where women must be put into a compliant state.³⁷ Women, on the other hand, gravitated towards influence, so if men were to accept women as the active person in male-female relationships, they would find themselves happily submitting to her.³⁸

Wonder Woman was significantly influenced by DISC theory, mostly in that Wonder Woman showed Marston's unique ideas about gender relations *in action*. Wonder Woman was the solution to the problems he saw as being caused by a world led by antagonistic male dominance. Regarding Wonder Woman, he wrote in *American Scholar* in 1943: "Give men an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they'll be proud to become her willing

³⁵ William Moulton Marston, *Emotions of Normal People* (1928).

³⁶ Hanley, 15.

³⁷ Marston, *Emotions of Normal People*, 256-7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 395.

slaves!”³⁹ That alluring woman was Wonder Woman – a confident, powerful, caring woman that could induce men to happily submit to her loving rule.

It’s All About Sex

Emotions of Normal People revealed Marston’s (how shall we put this delicately) *kinky* nature. “He really liked studying sex,” observed Jill Lepore, especially women’s sexuality.⁴⁰ In 1923, he published a study called “Sex Characteristics of Systolic Blood Pressure Behavior,” where, using the same machine that he used to detect deception by measuring blood pressure, he examined the relationship between emotion and arousal in men and women.⁴¹ Marston concluded that women expressed their emotions more than men, and that women’s emotions were grounded in their sexuality.

Marston made DISC theory about sex, too. In *Emotions of Normal People*, Marston applies DISC theory to heterosexual physical relationships in explicit detail, explaining that he believes men would enjoy sexual submission to “women who have captivated them,” resulting in “great happiness” for both.⁴² He also delves into more sexual deviant behavior; he focuses on “female love relationships”⁴³ at length. These were sexual relationships between women that were not necessarily homosexual.

An example of such a relationship is evident in Marston’s account of a “baby party,” a sorority initiation ritual at Tufts College in the 1920s in which first year pledges are dressed as babies, bound, blindfolded and paddled.⁴⁴ (see Figures 2.16 and 2.17 in Appendix 2) Marston explains that both the underclassmen captives and their upperclassmen captors enjoyed the experiences (connoting sexual pleasure), which Tim Hanley analyzes as meaning that “this [sexual] pleasure could come from simply submitting to another woman and being made helpless

³⁹ William Moulton Marston, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” *The American Scholar* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1943-44).

⁴⁰ Lepore.

⁴¹ William Moulton Marston, “Sex Characteristics of Systolic Blood Pressure Behavior,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 6, no. 6 (1923).

⁴² Marston, *Emotions of Normal People*, 340, 396.

⁴³ Hanley, 135.

⁴⁴ Marston, *Emotions of Normal People*, 305.

to their power, like in a bondage situation.”⁴⁵ Marston’s fascination with the baby party anecdote ties together several important themes. First, it was demonstrative of the tabloid quality of his psychological work, which was one of the nails in the coffins of his academic career. “Based on his path-breaking lie detector work, he could’ve had a stellar academic career,” laments journalist Jeet Heer, “But he damaged his own reputation by fudging his results and dabbling in sensationalism.”⁴⁶

Second, his interest in sexual practices like female love and bondage shows the first hints of Marston’s deviation from the norms of his time, both in philosophy and lifestyle. In the 1920s, these sexual behaviors were not considered socially acceptable; according to Lewis Call, “Marston’s work represents a dramatic attempt to expand the category of the normal to include a variety of erotic perspectives and behaviors that would otherwise be marginalized.”⁴⁷ Female love relationships, like those described in the baby party scenario, appear in *Wonder Woman*, whether it is the Amazons on the all-female Paradise Island or Etta Candy and the Holliday College girls. Sorority rituals similar to the baby party actually make direct appearances in the *Wonder Woman* comics at Holliday College with Etta Candy and the Beta Lamda sorority.⁴⁸ Bondage appears frequently as well – by one estimate *Wonder Woman* appears tied in one in four panels in the original ten comics.⁴⁹ Marston’s kinky nature undoubtedly influenced *Wonder Woman*, but it also should not be exaggerated. “Comic books aren’t psychology textbooks,” writes Tim Hanley. “The sexual undercurrents in *Wonder Woman* were buried below the surface...It would’ve been over the heads of the vast majority of comics readers.”⁵⁰

Wonder Woman was not only a product of her time, but also the product of this mind that was very much *not* part of its time. She was also a product of a third, hitherto unmentioned force – Marston’s dual muses, the two women in his life. Olive Byrne, a student of Marston’s at Jackson

⁴⁵ Hanley, 136.

⁴⁶ Jeet Heer, “The Hero We Need” *Hazlitt* 2014

⁴⁷ Lewis Call, *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Houndmills, United Kingdom Palgrave Macmillan 2012), 31.

⁴⁸ Lepore, 115.

⁴⁹ Hanley, 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

College (the women's college of Tufts University) in 1925, was Marston's research assistant who took him to the baby party he describes in his book.^{51 52} However, she was more than a professional colleague; she became Marston's live-in mistress and one-half of the inspiration behind Wonder Woman.

Physically, the resemblance between Byrne and Wonder Woman is striking. Like Wonder Woman, Byrne was thin, with raven hair and blue eyes. She constantly wore two thick silver bracelets, one around each wrist – “one African and the other Mexican” – which Marston transformed into Wonder Woman's bullet-deflecting bracelets. For Wonder Woman's independent spirit, Marston drew inspiration from his headstrong, brilliant wife, Holloway. When Marston was designing a superheroine that would capture the hearts of comic book readers nationwide, he looked no further than the two women – Byrne and Holloway – who captured his own heart.

PART II: WHO RUN THE WORLD – GIRLS

On November 10, 1937, William Moulton Marston held another self-promotional publicity stunt – a press conference at which he proclaimed that the United States would become a matriarchy in a thousand years into the future. “The next 100 years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy – a nation of Amazons in the psychological rather than physical sense,” he predicted.⁵³ “In 500 years, there will be a serious sex battle. And in 1,000 years, women will definitely rule the country.”⁵⁴

William Moulton Marston considered himself a feminist. In his psychological work, whether with the lie detector or with DISC theory, he believed he had proven that women “were more honest, more reliable and could work faster and more reliably than men.”⁵⁵ Even more radically, he believed that women were more capable of ruling the world than men, if only they realized their power. Marston hoped that Wonder Woman would be their role model. “What woman lacks is the dominance or self-assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires,”

⁵¹ Ibid., 136.

⁵² He credits her on the dedication page. See Marston, *Emotions of Normal People*, vi.

⁵³ Note that this reference to the Amazons predated Wonder Woman's creation by years.

⁵⁴ Associated Press, “Women to Rule in 1,000 Years Says Marston,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* Nov. 11, 1937.

⁵⁵ Dunne, “The Representation of Women in Comic Books Post WWII through the Radical 60's,” 2.

he wrote in a letter to comic book historian Coulton Waugh in 1945. "I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way."

This letter captures why Marston's feminism was both progressive and regressive. Marston took "the position that women were by nature less combative, inclined towards peace and nurturance instead of war and domination," writes feminist Lillian Robinson. She deems this type of feminism "essentialist."⁵⁶ Essentialism, which advocates that women are biologically and psychologically superior to men, is ironically rooted in the same Victorian separate sphere ideology discussed in the previous chapter. Both argue that women are biologically more nurturing, gentle and loving, but while the separate spheres ideology maintains that this means women should be kept inferior, in the home, away from the gritty public arena, essentialists argue the opposite; it is *because* women are more nurturing and loving that they *should* be in the public arena, running the world. Marston took it a step further. He argued that it was women's *submissiveness* that (paradoxically) made them *superior* to men, and that women could teach men how to submit through bondage and sexual domination.

"Marston was, in short, a crank," writes Noah Berlatsky pointedly. "His feminism was tied (all too literally) to his own erotic interests and desires."⁵⁷ Berlatsky raises a valid point about Marston's feminism being too closely rooted to his personal life. However, if Marston earnestly believed in the power of women, it was primarily because the loves (and yes, that is plural) of his life truly set formidable examples. He married his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Holloway, in 1915.⁵⁸ Holloway was brilliant and headstrong. Standing five feet tall, she was described by her daughter as "a small package of dynamite."⁵⁹ In a time when women were rarely formally educated, Holloway earned three degrees, without her father's financial support.⁶⁰ She majored in psychology at Mount Holyoke College, where she also

⁵⁶ Robinson, 27.

⁵⁷ Noah Berlatsky, "How Wonder Woman's Male Creator Helped Shape Third-Wave Feminism," *Ravishly* Dec. 10, 2014.

⁵⁸ Lepore.

⁵⁹ Lepore, 17; Marguerite Lamb, "Who Was Wonder Woman? Long-Ago LAW Alumna Elizabeth Marston Was the Muse Who Gave Us a Superheroine," *Boston University Alumni Magazine*, Fall 2001.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

enjoyed reading Greek. Her favorite was the poetry of Sappho, which was experiencing a renaissance in women's colleges in the early twentieth century.⁶¹ Sappho was a Greek lyricist hailing from the island of Lesbos who is known for her poems about female love.^{62 63} It was Holloway that suggested Wonder Woman's Amazonian catchphrase: "Suffering Sappho!"⁶⁴

Holloway, like the superheroine she inspired, was a force to be reckoned with. By the time she graduated Mount Holyoke, she had chopped her hair short, in a style favored by many early twentieth century feminists, including the Heterodites of Greenwich Village, a feminist group with which leading activists like Margaret Sanger were associated.⁶⁵ Like Marston, Holloway went to law school, but Harvard, her husband's choice, did not accept women at the time. "Those dumb bunnies at Harvard wouldn't take women, I went to Boston University," she later recounts.⁶⁶ She received her law degree in 1918, and recalls finishing bar exam "in nothing flat and had to go out and sit on the stairs waiting for Bill Marston and another Harvard man...to finish."⁶⁷ She worked with Marston at developing his systolic blood pressure test and received a master's degree from Radcliffe in 1921. "That year, Elizabeth punched in to work and didn't punch out for thirty-five years – despite social mores in some circles that said the office was fit for neither wife nor mother," Marguerite Lamb triumphantly declares. Holloway held numerous positions throughout her life, including working as an editor for *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *McCall's Magazine*.⁶⁸

The reason Elizabeth was able to be a mother and a careerwoman so flawlessly was because there was another party in her marriage to Marston. While she supported the household (her husband's track record at holding down a job was spotty), the responsibility of childrearing fell to the third member of she and Marston's marriage – Olive Byrne, Marston's research

⁶¹ Lepore.

⁶² Lepore, 22.

⁶³ The words 'lesbian' and 'Sapphic' are derived from her work. See Alix North, "Sappho, circa 630 B.C. ", Isle of Lesbos.

⁶⁴ Lepore, 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁶ Andrew H. Malcolm, "Our Towns; She's Behind the Match For That Man of Steel " *New York Times* Feb. 18, 1992.

⁶⁷ Lamb.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

assistant. In 1926, she moved in with Holloway and Marston, and the three lived in a polyamorous relationship.⁶⁹ “The affair went on until his death with love making for all,” Holloway said.⁷⁰ Both had two children by Marston, and entire clan – all four children and three parents – seemed content. “We were the biological children of Bill Marston,” explains Byrne Marston, Olive’s son. “It was an arrangement where they lived together fairly harmoniously...my brother and I were formally adopted by Elizabeth and Bill somewhere along the line.”⁷¹ It is not explicitly clear what the relationship was between Holloway and Byrne, but considering that Holloway named her daughter after Olive and Byrne gave her son the middle name Holloway, and the fact that the two women lived together for decades after Marston’s death, it is safe to assume that they were extremely close. They could have been a source of inspiration of the “female love” that Marston extolls in *Emotions of Normal People* and weaves into Wonder Woman.

Marston’s academic interest in deception seems so apropos when it comes to the great lengths that the Marston family took to cover up its peculiar domestic situation. “These living arrangements, unusual now and extraordinary in Marston’s day, may have accounted for some of his career changes. Few colleges would have countenanced a professor who was living with two women and having children with both of them,” argues Les Daniels, who suggests that Marston willingly sacrificed his academic career for Holloway and Byrne.⁷² Lepore speculates that it is not a coincidence that Marston left his teaching post at Tufts in 1926 (which he had held for less than a year), when Byrne graduated, surmising that he was probably fired due to his inappropriate relationship with a student.⁷³ Byrne gave herself a pseudonym, Olive Richard, fabricating a story that she was the widow of a fictional husband, William Richard.⁷⁴ She disappeared when census takers arrived.⁷⁵ For the longest time, not even her two children knew exactly who their father

⁶⁹ Lepore.

⁷⁰ Lepore, 279.

⁷¹ Daniels and Kidd, 33.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lepore, 117.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 146.

was.⁷⁶ The family told outsiders that Byrne was the family's housekeeper.⁷⁷ When she was not taking care of the children, she stole time to further her writing career, mostly articles for lifestyle magazines.⁷⁸

Occasionally, there was a fourth member to their threesome, Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, a free spirit who was probably the source of Marston's views on bondage. Her lifelong relationship with Marston started when she met Marston in 1918, right after World War I, when he was treating soldiers with shell shock at an army camp.⁷⁹ At the time, she was the army librarian. "She believed...in what she called 'love binding' [bondage]: the importance of being tied and chained," Lepore writes. "She also believed in extra-body consciousness, vibrations, reincarnation, and the psychic nature of orgasm."⁸⁰ She lived with the Marston family on and off. When she did stay with them, she lived in the attic. Her place in the family dynamic is the most ambiguous. Lepore takes care to note her erotic interests, but leads the reader to insinuate the rest, mostly because, as she has said after the publication of her book, Huntley left little record behind.⁸¹ She likely introduced Marston to his fascination with bondage, but her nomadic lifestyle removed her from the core trio to an extent.⁸² As further evidence of her influence on Wonder Woman, Huntley also occasionally did inking and lettering for *Wonder Woman* comics.⁸³

Surrounded by all these assertive, fascinating women, it was unemployed Marston that was the family flop, but the ladies, for whatever reason, loved him anyway. "Marston had a sweet thing going," remarks Katha Pollitt in *The Atlantic*. "Two [sometimes three] remarkably smart, adoring women to cater to his every need, each apparently believing she'd landed in feminist

⁷⁶ Ibid., 278.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 57

⁸⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁸¹ "The Man Behind Wonder Woman Was Inspired By Both Suffragists And Centerfolds," *National Public Radio*, Oct. 27, 2014.

⁸² On the second floor of the Marston home, Holloway and Byrne spilt in rooms connected by a bathroom, and Marston would move from room-to-room using the bathroom. Huntley was slightly removed from that whole arrangement, in the attic. See *ibid.*

⁸³ Noah Berlatsky, "The Free-Love Experiment That Created Wonder Woman," *The Atlantic* 2014.

heaven.”⁸⁴ It was just another of the myriad of contradictions that made up Marston’s life that do not quite make sense. He decried the prewar “haremlike” imprisonment of women, yet his own home was reminiscent of one.⁸⁵ What does make sense, after examining the women in Marston’s life, is where he got the inspiration for Wonder Woman. All he had to do was look around him. Wonder Woman received Holloway’s personality (intelligent, determined and bold) with Byrne’s appearance (black hair, blue eyes and silver cuffs), and a sprinkle of Huntley’s eccentricities. The unlikeliest of comic book writers, an unemployed psychologist with a secret sex life, was about to take the superhero world by storm.

PART III: HOW TO CREATE A “SUPER” POPULAR COMIC BOOK HERO

Step 1: Try a myriad of different careers, never succeeding at one enough to stick with it, while still maintaining an inflated sense of self-importance.

Step 2: Harbor unusual psychological ideas about deception, feminism, and the importance of submission.

Step 3: Be obsessed with popular culture.

Marston had a lifelong love affair with popular culture; it was part of what contributed to the downfall of his career as a scholar/professor (the other part likely being his unconventional home life). Marston was smart, but in the serious world of higher education, his sensationalist antics damaged his reputation as an intellectual. While he spent the 1920s steeped in the academic world, by the 1930s, after Olive Byrne moved into the Marston household, Marston had left academia, writing for popular magazines instead of journals, and working (in the loosest sense of the word) as a psychological consultant instead of professor. It was during this decade that he published both *The Lie Detector* and *Emotions of Normal People*, and performed his

⁸⁴ Politt.

⁸⁵ Heer.

stunts for the public, like appearing in the Gillette razor ads and holding press conferences about the coming matriarchy. Author Danny Fingeroth calls him “the first ‘pop’ psychologist in history.”⁸⁶

Before he got into comic books, Marston’s first popular culture love was the movies. He came of age when motion pictures were the newest toy on the block. In 1912, when he was a second-year undergraduate at Harvard, he started writing screenplays. “I purchased a book on the subject and spent considerable time at the picture shows studying the plots, style of picture produced by different companies, and the visual effects possible with moving pictures,” Marston recalled in 1915.⁸⁷ He sold the screenplays to pay for tuition. In 1915, he won a scenario-writing contest among college students, sponsored by the Edison Company.⁸⁸ He then tabled his scenario writing to focus on his deception research.⁸⁹

When it became clear that his academic career was collapsing, Marston returned to the pictures. In 1929, the year following his “blondes, brunettes and redheads” film test, he and his friend Walter Pitkin wrote a book, *The Art of Sound Pictures*, a guide to writing healthy, entertaining movie scripts. The book, in addition to film psychoanalysis (Marston’s DISC theory makes an appearance), includes tables of suggestive scenes (in terms of violence, sex, drugs, gambling, profanity, etc.) and the states in which they would be censored. The list is surprisingly comprehensive. For instance, if a scene depicting “kissing on the leg” was in a film, it would be censored in New York, Ohio and Maryland, but it was more circumstantial in Pennsylvania and Kansas.⁹⁰ Marston’s intimate knowledge of censorship likely helped him skirt the edge of the socially acceptable with some of the images that appear in his early *Wonder Woman* comics.

That same year (predating the publication of his book, though probably tied to the publicity surrounding his “blondes, brunettes and redheads” test), Marston was hired by Universal

⁸⁶ Fingeroth, 85.

⁸⁷ Lepore, 34.

⁸⁸ Lepore.

⁸⁹ Lepore, 35.

⁹⁰ William Moulton Marston, and Walter Pitkin, *The Art of Sound Pictures* (New York: D. Appleton and Company 1929).

Studios in California as a psychological consultant for their films. His job was to give the films more psychological realism.⁹¹ He worked at Universal for only a year.⁹²

And so, the 1930s found Marston mostly unemployed, living primarily off Holloway's earnings. He told his alma mater, Harvard, in 1930, "Many classmates can testify with me that it is very hard to earn a living; the only thing to do is to have a wife, like mine, who will go to work to support you."⁹³ At this low point, however, Marston pulled off his most impressive slight-of-hand – crafting a new respectable reputation for himself out of thin air, with the help of his mistress, Olive Byrne. Byrne, under her pseudonym Olive Richard, got a job writing for the women's magazine *Family Circle* in the mid 1930s. From 1935 on, she began writing a series of glowing pieces profiling none other than Marston. The articles were nothing short of awestruck hero-worship, praising Marston as this amazing, genius psychologist ("He's the kind of person to whom you confide things about yourself you scarcely realize," she wrote.⁹⁴). At this point, she had known Marston for ten years, yet she writes the articles as if she and Marston were strangers. "Everything about her life Olive Byrne at once hid and, like Marston, almost compulsively exposed," pointedly remarks Lepore. In the first *Family Circle* article, she recounts riding the train to meet Marston for the first time at his home, neglecting to mention that she had, in fact, been living there for years.⁹⁵ The articles are combinations of truth and lies to which Olive "Richard" slyly confesses when Marston turns the lie detector on her for one article: "I'd mix truth with falsehood and see if he could tell which was which."⁹⁶

He managed to parlay the publicity from Byrne's articles into a career in the burgeoning comic book industry. On October 25, 1940, *Family Circle* published an article by Olive Richards called "Don't Laugh At The Comics." Comic books were still in their infancy at this time. Superman was just over two years old, just in time for the inevitable backlash from parents about the effects of comic books on children. Olive Richard, alarmed that

⁹¹ Politt.

⁹² Daniels and Kidd, 18.

⁹³ Lepore, 146.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁹⁶ Olive Richard, "The Lie Detector," *Family Circle*, Nov. 1, 1935.

“comics magazine were poisonous mental pacifiers” for her children, went, of course, to “Dr. William Moulton Marston, the *Family Circle* psychologist” to ask his opinion.⁹⁷ There were concerns about the fascism in comics; Richard is plagued by “terrible visions of Hitlerian justice.”⁹⁸ When she asks Dr. Marston what he knows about comics, she is surprised when he immediately lists off impressive sounding statistics:

There are about 108 comics magazines on newsstands. Sales figures show that between 10,000,000 and 12,000,000 magazines are sold every month. That means \$1,000,000 or more are spent every month by comics fans... Surveys show that on the average four children read every book sold. That makes a total of somewhere between 40,000,000 or 50,000,000 juvenile readers per month.⁹⁹

He has been doing research on the comic books for a year, he tells Richard. He was something of an expert. He pointed out that the sway comic books held over the youth of America (and their parents – Marston argues that eighty-six percent of “parents enjoy reading them also.”¹⁰⁰) could be used for positive, educational purposes. “The comic sections of Sunday newspapers long ago became the Sabbath-day bible of more than 100,000 children [and] now the comics magazine have become their weekday textbooks.”¹⁰¹ Olive Richard asked her idol, “Do you think these fantastic comics are good reading for children?” Absolutely, Marston said; they indulge our inner fantasies, citing Superman as a prime example:

And the two wishes behind Superman are certainly the soundest of all; they are, in fact, our national aspirations of the moment – to develop unbeatable national might, and to use this great power, when we get it, to protect innocent, peace-loving people from destructive, ruthless evil.¹⁰²

Marston pays a compliment to Superman’s publisher, Max “Charlie” Gaines of DC Comics,¹⁰³ telling Richard, that Gaines had “the insight into fundamental emotional appeals which other publishers had lacked.” Whether it was the praise or Marston’s expertise, or just an effort to

⁹⁷ Olive Richard, "Don't Laugh At The Comics," *Family Circle*, Oct. 25, 1940, 10.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ At the time, DC Comics was actually called All-American Productions. It was not until it merged with National Periodical Publications and Detective Comics in 1944 that it known as DC Comics, even though its official name was National Periodical Publications until 1977. For the sake of clarity, this thesis will refer to the company as DC Comics.

shut Marston up, as Gaines' assistant Sheldon Mayer later suggested, the article persuaded Gaines that it was a wise move to have Marston working for him.¹⁰⁴ He hired Marston as a psychological consultant for the DC Comics' Editorial Advisory Board to review the material in comic books to head off comic book critics, and, as Gerard Jones put it, "promptly found himself among the strangest bedfellows any comic book publisher could have imagined."¹⁰⁵

After so many years of failure, Dr. William Moulton Marston found where he belonged. The comic book industry was literally just starting out, so it was small enough that Marston could easily be important. Furthermore, it was a popular culture medium with a large readership, so Marston could have a wide audience of young, impressionable minds (and their parents) with whom to share his ideas and philosophies, and in a genre renowned for its fantastical exaggerations, his eccentricities were in fact beneficial. "The picture story fantasy cuts loose the hampering debris of art and artifice and touches the tender spots of universal human desires and aspirations," Marston said. "Comics speak, without qualm or sophistication, to the innermost ears of the wishful self." As a psychologist, Marston must have found the ability of comics to speak to readers' most personal, intimate thoughts especially appealing. The classroom, the courtroom and the movie theater had all shunned him, but the comic book industry welcomed him with open arms.

From his position on the Editorial Advisory Board, Marston campaigned for a female superhero. His chief complaint about comic books, as he explained in an article he penned for *The American Scholar* in 1943, was "their blood-curdling masculinity."¹⁰⁶ Ever the champion of women, Marston felt that comics lacked a strong female voice. As he continued in *The American Scholar*:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a *feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus the allure of a good and beautiful woman.*¹⁰⁷ [emphasis added]

¹⁰⁴ Daniels and Kidd, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Jones.

¹⁰⁶ Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Marston suggested his idea of a female superhero to Gaines. The proposal was met with skepticism. Didn't he know that she would fail as every other female protagonist before her had failed? "Yes," Marston responded, "But they weren't *superwomen* - they weren't superior to men in strength as well as in feminine attraction and love-inspiring qualities." His superheroine would be different. Gaines decided to give him a shot.

Marston drafted the first version of his superheroine and submitted to Sheldon Mayer, Gaines' editorial assistant, in February 1941. Her name was "Suprema, the Wonder Woman." Mayer dropped the Suprema.¹⁰⁸

Wonder Woman was born.

¹⁰⁸ Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 60.

Chapter 3

Girl Meets World (War II)

“A UNIVERSAL THEME”

Accompanying the first script of “Suprema, the Wonder Woman” was a letter, addressed to assistant editor Sheldon Mayer from Dr. William Moulton Marston, dated February 23, 1941. The typewritten letter is very cordial, with an air of professionalism.

According to Marston, Mayer would find everything in order and the agreed-upon alterations made. Marston urges Mayer to call him should any further changes in regards to “story, names, costumes or subject-matter – as to arrangement of panels, etc.” be necessary. “That’s your business,” he writes. However, he adds:

You know, in fiction or articles, if you hit a universal theme, symbols or experience, not merely reader identification but something more, a racial truth, you get tremendous results. You follow a fad slavishly you don’t get far or travel long. In this theme I am using I fully believe that I am hitting a great movement now under way – the growth in power of women and I want you to let that theme alone – or drop the project.

...The NEW WOMEN [Amazons] thus freed and strengthened by supporting themselves (on Paradise Island) developed enormous physical and mental power. But they have to use it for other people’s benefit or they go back to chains, and weakness. Now all this is true and besides making just exciting plots as false or phony themes, will inevitably hit a deep responsive chord, in time, in readers’ minds – even in the medium of comics magazines! So that’s why I want to keep this theme straight and just as it is.

“Sincerely,” Marston ends the letter.¹ He does not sign it. It was an unintentional metaphor; once Wonder Woman left the confines of his slightly twisted mind, she no longer belonged to just him; boys and girls alike embraced her as a product of the peculiar time that was World War II.



How did Wonder Woman become so popular? It seems deceptively simply; she was popular because she appealed to people. However, there was something peculiar happening in wartime American society at the time, and there was definitely something peculiar happening in her creator’s head (and household). How did these circumstances contribute to her ascendancy into mainstream popular culture, where she has remained for over 70 years?

In the study of history, there are two opposing frameworks of causation: determinism and intentionality.² Determinism is the theory that all historical events are inevitable; every occurrence is brought to fruition by the sweeping, impersonal forces of history or by causes that cannot be influenced by one person, like, for example, the institutional organization of a society.³ Intentionality proposes just the reverse; history is malleable, its direction is subject to human whims. Intentionality has also been referred to as the “Cleopatra’s Nose” theory, derived from the writings of French philosopher Blaise Pascal.⁴ In his *Pensées* (circa 1669), he mused, “Cleopatra’s nose, had it been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered.”⁵ Had her nose been shorter, had she been less beautiful, perhaps she would have not been able to seduce Marc Anthony and Julius Caesar, and history might have unfolded quite differently. In the framework of intentionality, one person’s actions can have a significant influence.

Proponents of determinism would maintain that the rise of a female superhero was inevitable at this time – whether it was Marston’s, or anyone else’s, was irrelevant. “If Wonder

¹ As quoted in Joe Sergi, "Tales From The Code: Whatever Happened to the Amazing Amazon - Wonder Woman Bound by Censorship", Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (accessed Oct. 4 2014).

² Neil Munro, "Causation in History" (accessed March 11, 2015).

³ Roy F. Baumeister, "Just Exactly What Is Determinism?," *Psychology Today* Feb. 15, 2009.

⁴ Munro.

⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 48.

Wonder Woman hadn't arrived, it's easy to imagine that someone else would have created a major superheroine around this same time," writes Sarah Kerr. "Circumstances—the new medium's need for strategic moral cover, market opportunity, the national hunger for heroes—were urgently calling her into being."⁶ Proponents of intentionality would argue that it was Marston who should get the credit for making Wonder Woman popular. As is more often than not the case in history, the answer is not black-and-white; the truth lies somewhere in between. Wonder Woman's popularity can be attributed to both grand forces of history that shaped the World War II world and to the actions of one man – William Moulton Marston. She could not have entered mainstream popular culture at any other time.

This chapter will draw together the narratives presented in Chapter 1 and 2, which come together with the creation of Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman is a product of both her time (Chapter 1) and Marston's mind (Chapter 2). It is no coincidence that Wonder Woman appears on the scene at this particular moment in history when there was an interruption in the gendered status quo for the duration of the war. However, it was Marston's radical vision that capitalized on this "great movement underway," made it fantastical and entertaining, and captured the imagination of a nation.

Thanks to the influence of the war and Marston, Wonder Woman was a feminist role model with sex appeal, a fiercely independent woman who pines after Steve Trevor and an exaggeration of the Rosie the Riveter image with the physique of a pin-up girl. Like the complex feminine identity during World War II and like the contradictory philosophies of Dr. William Moulton Marston, the *Wonder Woman* comics often contain paradoxical elements coexisting harmoniously. While seemingly ridiculous at times, they are an essential part of her character and appeal. Wonder Woman had enough of an aesthetic pop to fit in, but enough of an edge to stand out.

This chapter is composed of four sections. Part I analyzes her popularity during World War II. Part II and Part III explains her appeal to different demographics: as a feminist role model

⁶ Sarah Kerr, "Wonder Woman: The Weird, True Story," *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 20, 2014.

for female readers and a sexy dominatrix to heterosexual male readers. Part IV will be a series of historical case studies that seek to isolate Marston's influence from the influence of the war, in order to determine that Wonder Woman was unique and to prove that not just any female superheroine during World War II would have garnered the same response.

PART I: IT'S ALWAYS A POPULARITY CONTEST

"I'll take a chance on your *Wonder Woman*! But you'll have to write the strip yourself," DC Comics publisher Max "Charlie" Gaines told Marston when Marston, then on DC Comics' Editorial Advisory Board, pitched the idea. "After six months' publication we'll submit your woman hero to a vote of our comic readers. If they don't like here I can't do any more about it."⁷

Marston was confident that comic book readers would be receptive to his superheroine, but of course, she had to prove herself. Wonder Woman debuted in the eighth issue of *All-Star Comics* in December 1941. *All-Star Comics* was an anthology comic book, published by DC Comics, that featured adventures by the members of the Justice Society, a league of the headlining superheroes of the day. Wonder Woman appeared as an insert in the back of the issue, a sneak peek to gauge readers' interest.⁸ "Introducing *Wonder Woman*," the first page announces. "At last, in a world torn by the hatreds and wars of men, appears a **woman** to whom the problems and feats of men are mere child's play!"⁹ Underneath the title, there Wonder Woman is, seemingly jumping or running out of the page towards the reader, but looking at something beyond them. She looks strong, with killer biceps and muscular legs, but her strength is softened by her feminine skirt, shiny lips and glossy hair. Her first adventure details how Wonder Woman leaves the utopia of Paradise Island because she falls in love with Steve Trevor of the U.S. Army and returns with him to help America win the war.

In the spring of 1942, Wonder Woman's moment of truth came; she was put to a vote. As Marston later recounted in Phi Beta Kappa's journal, *The American Scholar*:

⁷ Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," 44

⁸ Sandifer, 7.

⁹ Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8*, 1.

After five months the publishers ran a popularity contest between Wonder Woman and seven rival men heroes, which startling results. Wonder Woman proved a forty to one favorite over her nearest male competitor, capturing more than 80 per cent of all the votes cast by thousands of juvenile comics fans. The credit is all Wonder Woman's – I mean the wonder which is really woman's when she adds masculine strength to feminine tenderness and allure.¹⁰

Marston had the general gist right, but he exaggerated the facts, likely due his habit of self-aggrandizement. Gaines was true to his word and did indeed poll the comic book readers with a mail-in survey – a favorite strategy of his. *Sensation Comics No. 5* included a questionnaire with a limited deal: to the first one thousand readers to fill it out would receive the next issue of *Sensation Comics* free.¹¹ This is likely the survey that Marston was referencing, though there are some discrepancies with his account. The survey asked readers to rank which, among six superheroes (not eight, as in Marston's account) featured in *Sensation Comics*, would readers like to see "represented in the Justice Society of America and take part in their episodes in All-Star Comics." The choices were the Wildcat, Wonder Woman, Mr. Terrific, The Black Pirate, The Gay Ghost and the Little Boy Blue. Wonder Woman won by a landslide. She was the top choice of 500 out of 616 total responses (which is, in fact, 80 percent of the vote, as Dr. Marston reported). The second place winner, Mr. Terrific, garnered only 24 votes. Wonder Woman winning by a ratio of 20 votes to 1 (not 40 to 1 as Marston said).¹² Jill Lepore suggests that Gaines rigged the vote. "Gaines wanted to include Wonder Woman in the Justice Society; he got exactly the result he wanted," she argues. "On the ballot, Wonder Woman's face is nearly double the size of the faces of the other contestants, and her face, and no other character's, appears twice."¹³

If doubt remains after Marston's exaggerations and Gaines' manipulations, Gaines also conducted a second survey of Wonder Woman's popularity a couple months later, just to be sure.

¹⁰ Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics."

¹¹ *Sensation Comics No. 5* is dated May 1942, which would indeed be five months after Wonder Woman debuted, but comic books are often postdated up to four months for "arcane reasons having to do with retail restocking practices." The results, according to Lepore, were tabulated in March 1942. See Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), xiii. See also Lepore, 205.

¹² Lepore, 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 205.

In *All-Star Comics No. 11* (June/July 1942), the first *All-Star Comics* in which Wonder Woman joins the Justice Society on their adventure, a reader poll asked the audience, "Should WONDER WOMAN be allowed, even though a woman, to become a member of the Justice Society?"¹⁴ The response was overwhelming in Wonder Woman's favor. Out of the first 1,801 responses, 1,598 said yes. Only 203 respondents answered no.¹⁵ Marston was vindicated; Wonder Woman had seemed to hit a "deep responsive chord...with readers' mind," as he predicted back in February of the previous year. In response to this positive feedback, Wonder Woman got her very own series in the summer of 1942.

By all accounts, *Wonder Woman* was a knockout bestseller from the start, even at times outselling her biggest competitors, *Superman* and *Batman*.¹⁶ Comic books publishers did not release sales figures, but in July 1943, Peggy le Boutillier reported in *The Woman* that sales of *Wonder Woman No. 3* had reached half a million copies.¹⁷ ¹⁸ Noted Wonder Woman historian Tim Hanley estimates her readership was about five million kids per issue.¹⁹ While they were the majority of the consumers, children, however, were not the only ones reading Wonder Woman. According to the New York Times, one in four magazines sent to the G.I.s overseas was a comic book, but unfortunately, how many of these exports were *Wonder Woman* comic books was not recorded.²⁰ The numbers may have been unreliable, but the trend was not. People loved Wonder Woman.

¹⁴ William Moulton Marston, *All Star Comics No. 11* (DC Comics 1942).

¹⁵ Lepore, 209.

¹⁶ Hanley, 157. Also found in Lepore, 209.

¹⁷ Reliable sales figures are nearly impossible to pin down. For example, in 1947, Coulton Waugh, a comic book historian who exchanged letters with Marston, wrote, "At one time, the total magazine circulation of Wonder Woman was around two and a half million." This statistic is extremely vague, however. It is very possible that it came from Marston himself, who is well known for his flair for exaggeration. "At one time" could mean anytime between the start of Wonder Woman in 1942 and the publication of Waugh's work in 1947, and "total magazine circulation" is imprecise, though it is likely annual. See Colton Waugh, *The Comics (Studies in Popular Culture)* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 261.

¹⁸ As quoted in Bunn, "The Lie Detector, Wonder Woman and Liberty: The Life and Work of William Moulton Marston," 95.

¹⁹ Assuming that more than one child was reading each comic book. See Hanley, 17.

²⁰ As referenced in Wright, 31.

PART II: WONDER WOMAN – FEMINIST?

Wonder Woman was popular, for sure, but the original question still remains – *why?* The secret to Wonder Woman’s popularity was her ability to push the boundaries, but never exceed them. The nature of popular culture is constantly changing. The pattern of that change is an evolution; there exists continuity between the current trend and the next one. “The next best thing” must be novel without being outlandish; it must balance the audience’s insatiable desire for the new with its proclivity for the comfort of the familiar. In essence, this is why Wonder Woman was able to become so popular; she came in the right time at the right place, and at that historical moment, she was poised to become “the next big thing.” She was different *enough*, while still being familiar *enough*, infusing pop culture with something exciting while not deviating too far from the dominant public discourse. It was Marston’s own unique brand of self-proclaimed feminism that provided both the novelty (a strong female protagonist) and the familiarity (a loving, nurturing, white female protagonist) that made Wonder Woman so popular.

Amazons

With the significant exception of Rosie the Riveter, powerful women in American pop culture were relatively scarce, which is probably why Marston decided to make Wonder Woman Amazonian. The Amazons were a matriarchal society of warrior women from Greek mythology. As Queen Hippolyta told her daughter, Princess Diana, “In the days of Ancient Greece, many centuries ago, we Amazons were the foremost nation in the world. In Amazonia, women ruled and all was well.”²¹ They are most known for their appearance in the myth of the Labors of Heracles, in which the Greek hero Heracles must obtain the girdle of the Amazon queen, Hippolyta.²²

Marston was undoubtedly familiar with this tale; both he and Holloway studied Greek in college (one may recall Holloway’s affinity for Sapphos). The tale was reworked into the origin story of Wonder Woman, though the Greek Heracles is replaced by his better-known Roman

²¹ Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8*, 3.

²² David Sacks, Oswyn Murray, and Lisa R. Brody, *Encyclopedia of the Ancient Greek World*, Rev. ed. (New York: Facts On File, 2005), 27.

counterpart, Hercules. It is not a flattering depiction for the male hero. "Hercules, the strongest man in the world, stung by taunts that he couldn't conquer the Amazon women...by deceit and trickery managed to secure my *magic girdle* and soon we Amazons were taken into slavery."²³ This depiction suggests, as Wonder Woman historian Philip Sandifer points out, "that the beguilement of men is specifically sexual."²⁴ ²⁵ With the goddess Aphrodite's help, however, the Amazons escaped men's slavery and fled to Paradise Island.

Besides a collegiate love for Greek mythology, there is another reason why Marston chose for his superhero to be one of these warrior women. Amazons also featured prominently in early twentieth century suffragist and feminist literature, right around the time Marston and Holloway were in college. Jill Lepore makes a striking connection between the conventions of these feminist utopian works and Wonder Woman comic books and suggests that Marston drew inspiration from them.²⁶ These works include "Child of the Amazons" a poem written in 1913 by Max Eastman, founder of the New York Men's League for Woman Suffrage, in which an Amazon falls in love with a man (much like Wonder Woman fell in love with Steve Trevor) and an overthrow of the patriarchy is forecasted ("Their tyranny, Amazons their revolt," Eastman writes.²⁷), much like Marston predicts at his press conference in 1937. Princess Diana's birth on Paradise Island – molded from clay and brought to life by Aphrodite – echoes the parthenogenesis (reproduction without fertilization – basically without men) in the utopian matriarchy in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915).²⁸ The idea that women had full control over choosing whether or not to be a mother was echoed by the cry for birth control of Margaret Sanger (the aunt of Marston's live-in mistress, Olive Byrne). Wonder Woman was a vehicle for some of the ideas in these largely unknown works to disseminate to a mainstream audience.

²³ Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8*, 5.

²⁴ Sandifer, 13.

²⁵ The sexual undertones of "deceit and trickery" is made in Wonder Woman No. 1. "Hercules used woman's own weapon against Queen Hippolyta," Marston wrote, "He made love to her!" Although in the 1940s, "made love" probably meant whispering sweet nothings and not intercourse. See Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 1*, 12.

²⁶ Lepore.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

However, the likelihood of a comic book audience, especially the majority of whom were children, explicitly picking up on this narrative is small, though it did make for an exciting read.

The name of Paradise Island was extremely appropriate for the idyllic setting. It was perfect. It was peaceful. "Beauty and happiness are your Amazon birthright," the queen tells her daughter, "So long as you remain on Paradise Island."²⁹ Most appealing to a nation that had just entered a worldwide conflict, there was no war. The Amazons worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and pledged themselves to upholding love and beauty in her service. In the second issue of *Wonder Woman*, Marston sets up the perennial struggle between the male god of war, Mars, and the patron goddess of the Amazons, Aphrodite.

"Mars and Aphrodite, Goddess of love and beauty, have been rivals for control of this earth ever since life began. At present, Mars is far ahead in the struggle against his beautiful opponent. *More than four-fifths of the entire world is at war! More than two billion people are involved in the present colossal conflict.* Mars is triumphant!"³⁰

There are two important messages in this passage. The first is how Marston makes an emotional appeal to his audience by integrating World War II into this mythological rivalry, forging an immediate connection between the reader and *Wonder Woman*. Then, Marston uses the emotionally charged situation to work in his own philosophies, particularly DISC Theory. The outcome of the present conflict hinges on the victory of the *female* goddess. If women ruled the world, there would be no war; women are too peace-loving for that. Marston frames an American victory in the war as a victory for Aphrodite's rule – for women's rule. As the second issue of *Wonder Woman* declares, "If America wins, peace will return - the world will be ruled happily by the love and beauty of Aphrodite!"³¹ If readers wanted America to win (which presumably American readers wanted), then Marston told them they must want a matriarchy.

Patriotism for Feminism

Linking *Wonder Woman* to America's victory was a clever, albeit sneaky, tactic of Marston. "Proving himself as a master manipulator, Marston was using patriotism to

²⁹ Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 1*, 16.

³⁰ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*

promote feminism,” writes Joe Sergi.³² When Steve Trevor washes ashore on Paradise Island, Aphrodite and Athena tell Queen Hippolyta to send the strongest Amazon back with him to help America, “the last citadel of democracy and of equal rights for women.”³³ Princess Diana, who has, of course, fallen in love with him, gives up eternal life and “leaves Paradise Island to take the man who she loves back to America – the land she learns to love and protect, and adopts as her own!”³⁴ Even her costume is patriotic. Adorned with the American symbols of an eagle and stars, she sports red, white and blue while defending America from those who are trying to bring it down. By having Wonder Woman be on the same side as and fight for America, Marston irreversibly links their two objectives; as Mitra Emad writes, “Marston ties together ‘nationhood’ and ‘democracy’ to woman’s empowerment.”³⁵ The fight for America was linked with the fight for women’s rights. This message, which would have been too radical at any other time, fit in with the Rosie the Riveter narrative of wartime popular culture.

In Golden Age *Wonder Woman* comics, Wonder Woman’s enemies are usually war-related. Mars, the god of war, sends his minions, the Earl of Greed, the Duke of Deception and the Count of Conquest, after Wonder Woman because he is concerned that she will win the war for America.³⁶ Real-life axis villains Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito all make appearances as foes. In the second issue alone, she takes on all three.³⁷ In *Wonder Woman No. 4* (April/May 1943), she fights alongside the Marines against the Japanese:

“Charging into the midst of the Japanese troops, Wonder Woman drives a wedge of fierce, fighting femininity,” Marston writes.³⁸ On the January 1943 cover of *Sensation Comics No. 13*, Wonder Woman bowls for pins with the heads of Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini.³⁹

³² Sergi.

³³ Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body-Mythologies of Gender and Nation," 964.

³⁶ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 37, 47, 53.

³⁸ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," 183.

³⁹ Wonder Woman, giving a whole new meaning to the insult “pinhead.” See Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 13," 64.

More often than not, however, her enemies were related to the war, but not on the front lines – foes like corrupt businessmen or Axis agents. She uncovers Gestapo agents passing American codes in the U.S. Army Intelligence Office, takes down a Nazi spy operation masquerading as a logging operation and rescues Steve Trevor from the clutches of a Japanese princess/spy, Princess Maru, as well as getting the leaders of the rubber industry to collaborate with the government and thwarting an international racketeering ring from selling secret army reports.⁴⁰ (see Figures 3.8 – 3.12 in Appendix 3) Wonder Woman is not wholly unique in this respect. Most Golden Age superheroes shared that patriotic spirit, yet most did not go to war; comic book publishers thought that it would be demeaning to the very real sacrifice the soldiers were making if superheroes swooped in and won the battles with ease. Cord Scott suggests another part of reason Wonder Woman fought indirectly was that “the possibility of women in combat, even comic book ones, was difficult for readers to grasp.”⁴¹ It is an example of how Wonder Woman pushed the boundaries, but never far enough to scare away readers.

Marston’s feminist patriotism or patriotic feminism – whatever you want to call it – was also racist. “Wonder Woman failed to challenge the long-standing prejudice that the feminine ideal was white. Not only were Wonder Woman and her sister Amazons all fair-skinned, the *Wonder Woman* comic books reinforced racism by debasing minority characters,” argues Michelle Finn. When someone is not white, they are depicted as caricatures. The Japanese are actually colored yellow and have an over-pronounced ‘s’ when they speak.⁴² They are seen as interchangeable with any other East Asian nationality.⁴³ All of the Germans speak with ‘v’s instead of ‘w’s: “Vonder Voman,” they yell when our superheroine approaches.⁴⁴ Italians are all music-loving lotharios.⁴⁵ Domestically, stereotypes persist as well. African Americans are

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 19," 29; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 24," 194; Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," 204; William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 26," in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1944), 31.

⁴¹ Scott, 333.

⁴² Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," 185.

⁴³ Sandifer, 15.

⁴⁴ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 19," 28.

⁴⁵ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 16," 169.

bellhops and nursemaids who talk in an exaggerated dialect and add minstrel-style comic relief.⁴⁶ As Philip Sandifer writes, "This is hard to explain without resorting to the harsh but likely accurate truth that Marston and Peter were, in fact, spectacularly racist."⁴⁷

They were not alone. Racism was not an unusual phenomenon at all in World War II comic books. Xenophobia was exacerbated by the War Writers Board, the branch of the Office of War Information that covered comic books, who deliberately sought to "racialize America's enemies as justification for total war."⁴⁸ While there is no evidence to suggest that Marston was ever a member of the War Writers Board, the government's promotion of these stereotypes ensured their proliferation in the mainstream, government sponsored or not. Apparently racism was not one of the evils Wonder Woman would fight, and that was good news for her popularity in xenophobic wartime America.

Super Role Model

It may have not been all-inclusive, but Marston's message was nonetheless progressive for its time. Marston's Wonder Woman is truly amazing, and it is no wonder that she was inspiring to her readers. She is just as strong, if not stronger than her male counterparts. Whether it is hitting a home run to raise funds for Holliday College, the fictional college of Wonder Woman's collegiate cohorts (the Holliday girls), tightrope-walking to carry children out of a burning building, or stopping an oncoming train, there seems to be nothing Wonder Woman could not do.⁴⁹ In *Wonder Woman No. 7* (Winter 1943), Wonder Woman even runs for president against the Man's Party 1000 years in the future, seemingly fulfilling Marston's 1937 prophecy.⁵⁰ She believes that there are more important things for girls to be doing than simply getting married (much to Steve Trevor's dismay). It is easy to see how Wonder Woman would have been inspiring to young girls.

Trina Robbins,

⁴⁶ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3," 114; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 31," 172.

⁴⁷ Sandifer, 15.

⁴⁸ Hirsch, "'This Is Our Enemy': The Writers War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945," 448.

⁴⁹ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 33; Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3," 140; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 26," 35.

⁵⁰ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 7," 195.

feminist, comic book artist and historian, grew up reading *Wonder Woman* comics. “This was so liberating for me as a kid to read this,” she said in an interview. “It was almost as though Marston had given us permission to believe that there was something other than the patriarchal bearded guy.”⁵¹

In 1945, William Moulton Marston wrote to comic book historian Coulton Waugh, “Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.”⁵² Wonder Woman was Marston’s role model for young girls – the new type of women. As he told “Olive Richard” (Byrne’s pseudonym) for *Family Circle*:

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 man 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.⁵³

Even though she had superpowers, Wonder Woman maintained that any woman could be a wonder woman if they believed in themselves.⁵⁴ “What I’ve done proves this,” Wonder Woman proclaims at an assembly honoring her. “That nothing is impossible if you just grit your teeth and tell yourself I will do it!”⁵⁵ That, according to Marston, is the secret to Amazon power and fit well into Marston’s philosophies that if only they could realize their potential, women could rule the world. “You see girls, there is nothing to it,” she exclaims as she hoists a massive boulder above her head. “All you have to do is have confidence in your own strength!”⁵⁶ She champions the average woman.

Wonder Woman is surrounded by supportive female communities – the Amazons on Paradise Island and the Holliday girls embody female solidarity and sisterhood, the virtues of

⁵¹ Noah Berlatsky, "How Wonderful, A Woman's World": Trina Robbins on Wonder Woman" (accessed March 19, 2015).

⁵² As quoted in Finn, 7.

⁵³ As quoted in Sergi.

⁵⁴ That is, if one was white. See previous section.

⁵⁵ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 15" 158.

⁵⁶ This specific line, which is so indicative of Marston's philosophies, was actually written by Marston's secretary, Joye Murchison, who helped Marston write Wonder Woman when he became ill. See Tim Hanley, "Guest Post: The Women Behind Wonder Woman", Tumblr (accessed Jan. 12, 2015); for the actual line, see Joye Murchison and H. G. Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 13* (DC Comics 1945).

cooperation, refreshing in a society when women are so often made to compare themselves to other women. Although Etta Candy and the Holliday girls (Wonder Woman's friends who attend Holliday College, have no superpowers), they join Wonder Woman on her adventures and save the day on many occasions. They play on Wonder Woman's baseball team to fundraise for Holliday College, distract Italian prison guards with music and help Wonder Woman destroy her kidnappers' castle in a dream world.^{57 58} She empowers the Holliday girls to seize their own strength. In one issue, Wonder Woman and the Holliday girls travel to the Fourth Dimension, where "you are as you think you are," the Holliday girls all appear dressed in Wonder Woman's star-spangled costume. Wonder Woman loves it; she says, "I'm so glad you all think of yourselves as Wonder Women!"⁵⁹ Wonder Woman may be the most powerful woman in the world, but she cannot save the world by herself. "Wherever you go we're going too, Wonder Woman – you'll need us," the Holliday girls exclaim in *Sensation Comics No. 16* (April 1943).⁶⁰ Gloria Steinem elaborates:

Wonder Woman's family of Amazons on Paradise Island, her band of college girls in America, and her efforts to save individual women are all welcome examples of women working together and caring about each other's welfare. The idea of such cooperation may not seem particularly revolutionary to the male reader: men are routinely depicted as working well together. But women know how rare and therefore exhilarating the idea of sisterhood really is.⁶¹

One mission in which Wonder Woman stressed women's cooperation was the war effort.

Wonder Woman No. 5 (June/July 1943) opens with the following exchange between Mars and his slave-secretary:

Slave-Secretary: Here is the report you asked for – there are eight million American women in war activities – by 1944 there will be eighteen million!

Mars: Hounds of Hades! Women! This smells like more of Aphrodite's work!

Slave-Secretary: American women are warriors – WAACs, WAVEs, secret agents! 10 million British women are in war service, 30 million Russian women –

⁵⁷ Interesting to note: Holliday College, the fictional women's college of the Wonder Woman universe, in a combination of Holloway's name and her alma mater, Mount Holyoke. See Carol Tavris, "Wonder Woman For President," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 24, 2014.

⁵⁸ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 34; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 16," 169; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 25," 20.

⁵⁹ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 30," 128.

⁶⁰ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 16," 167.

⁶¹ Marston et al.

Mars: Silence – enough! If women gain power in war they'll escape man's domination completely! They'll achieve a horrible independence!⁶²

This “horrible independence” is, of course, exactly what Marston wanted to happen. In popular culture, Wonder Woman fit right in with the Rosie the Riveters who had permeated across pop culture – from government propaganda posters and magazine covers – which was an important part of why she became popular. In this instance, Marston's philosophies and the dominant public discourse (as well as the messages in government propaganda) perfectly align. Time and time again, the Rosie the Riveter narrative, extolling women who did their part for the nation at war, appears in Wonder Woman comics. Diana Prince has a job as an army secretary. Wonder Woman sells war bonds, and many comics feature a “Buy War Bonds and Stamps!” logo in the last panel.⁶³ The Holliday girls play music for the soldiers to build their morale.⁶⁴ On the bottom of the pages in *Sensation Comics No. 30* (June 1944), there is advice for how “boys and girls, every day, can give war aid in many a way,” including tips for rationing and recycling.⁶⁵ When the evil Dr. Psycho's enslaved wife says to Wonder Woman, “Submitting to a cruel husband's domination has ruined my life! But what can a weak girl do?” Wonder Woman urges her, “Get strong! Earn your own living – join the WAACs or WAVEs and fight for your country!”⁶⁶

The difference between Rosie the Riveter is that while Rosie the Riveter's empowerment was coded as temporary, just for the war, Marston saw it as the start of momentous social change. He did, however, limit the progressiveness of his message in other ways. The radicalness of Marston's philosophies was tempered by the fact that Wonder Woman, like Rosie the Riveter, still maintained her stereotypical femininity, even as she became powerful. Even though she subverted traditional gender norms, Wonder Woman was still a woman of the forties. She falls in love with literally the first man she ever lays eyes on, Steve Trevor, and gives up

⁶² Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 5," 36-7.

⁶³ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 41; Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 18," 20.

⁶⁴ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3," 118.

⁶⁵ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 30," 121.

⁶⁶ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 5," 51.

eternal life on Paradise Island to follow him back to America.⁶⁷ She becomes extremely jealous when Trevor pays attention to any other woman.⁶⁸ At times, she is preoccupied with superficial concerns, like clothes and beauty. In *Sensation Comics No. 1*

(January 1942), the first thing Wonder Woman does after arriving in America is check out the American fashion. "Always the woman," Marston writes, "Diana goes window shopping."⁶⁹ In another adventure, her eyes are taped shut. "My feminine vanity won't let me pull out my eyelashes," she says. "I'll have to escape blindfolded."⁷⁰ She is distraught over leaving her famous red boots on Saturn, to which Steve Trevor replies, "There's a woman for you – she destroys a sky road, saves the Earth – then worries about a pair of shoes!"⁷¹

Marston's essentialist feminism was to blame for these regressive stereotypes. As Sharon Zechowski and Caryn Neumann argue, "Although her mission is to combat the evils of the patriarchy, Wonder Woman is also its ultimate projection of female perfection."⁷² Marston believed that women should rule the world because of the stereotypically feminine qualities that he believed were simply in their genes. They were, according to him, wired to be more nurturing, more loving, more peaceful (less likely to turn towards violence or aggression to solve problems), and that is why they would make better leaders than men.

Wonder Woman embodied Marston's philosophy that women could use their beauty and their feminine wiles to conquer the men around them. In her skimpy costume with her glossy hair and shiny lips, she is statuesquely beautiful. She looks as if she could fit in on the pages of *Esquire* with the rest of the pin-up girls, though the effect is softened by H.G. Peter's block-like style. Her beauty was essential; as Marston wrote in a letter to Gaines on September 15, 1943, "A

⁶⁷ Marston, *All Star Comics No. 8*, 2.

⁶⁸ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 50," in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1946), 31.

⁶⁹ William Moulton Marston, *Sensation Comics No. 1* (DC Comics 1942), 3.

⁷⁰ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 45.

⁷¹ William Moulton Marston and H. G. Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 10," in *Wonder Woman Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1944), 48.

⁷² Zechowski, 134.

woman character without allure would be like a Superman without muscle.”⁷³ Her secret power was her feminine nurturing spirit. She was kind to and defended children, animals, even plants.⁷⁴ (There was literally one issue, written from the perspective of fir balsam tree, where Wonder Woman literally communicates with the tree.⁷⁵ In the same issue, Wonder Woman also saves two children from Nazi spies.⁷⁶) She does not resort to violence as much as her male peers; “Bullets never solved a human problem yet,” she declares in *Wonder Woman No. 6* (Fall 1943).⁷⁷ She sees good in everyone, and believes that even the most hardened villains, especially if they are women, are redeemable, most evidenced by successful reformation of Baroness Paula Von Gunther, one of Wonder Woman’s most evil enemies. After going through Amazon training on Reform Island (the Amazon prison), Paula becomes one of her most devoted allies.⁷⁸ Marston’s philosophies, which account for Wonder Woman’s outlandishness, are also ironically the very thing that ground her in her time.

Not only did Marston’s theories rely on stereotypes and generalizations that reduce all women to having the same personality traits, but also, as Tim Hanley argues, “A matriarchy maintains an unequal society, just with reversed roles, and Marston optimistically refused to entertain the idea that power would corrupt women as much as it did men.”⁷⁹ Later feminists, who stressed the equality of the sexes, rejected Marston’s idea that women were morally superior. Even though his message was flawed, it was not unredeemable as a powerful feminist idea. Would Wonder Woman have been a better feminist if perhaps she looked like a brooding she-hulk? Marston “celebrated feminine values instead of dismissing them as unimportant,” which should be applauded.⁸⁰ To criticize Wonder Woman for being too feminine to be a feminist creates a false dichotomy between the two qualities, as though women cannot be both.

⁷³ As quoted in Finn, 14.

⁷⁴ Diana Schutz, "Foreword," in *Wonder Woman Archives*(New York: DC Comics, 2000), 7.

⁷⁵ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 14," 80.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁷ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 6 " 136.

⁷⁸ Marston and Peter, "Sensation Comics No. 32," 197.

⁷⁹ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 16.

⁸⁰ Zechowski, 135.

In further defense of Wonder Woman's idealized femininity – being an idealized is a occupational hazard of the superhero profession. Wonder Woman is not being singled out or treated differently than her female counterparts; for a genre built on exaggerated archetypes and simplistic narratives, this was normal. This phenomenon is what allowed her to be radical while still not making big enough splash to be marginalized. “The audience's familiarity with the superhero genre allowed Wonder Woman's story to be told, but the transgressive elements of her story were safely contained within a dominant masculine narrative, thus preserving the gender status quo,” Zechowski and Neumann conclude.⁸¹

Wonder Woman's femaleness made her more relatable to young female readers. As Gloria Steinem argues, before Wonder Woman, “The only option for a girl reader is to identify with the male characters – pretty difficult, even in the androgynous years of childhood.”⁸² Wonder Woman was a game changer – the superpowered everywoman. However, comic books were considered a masculine realm, a medium primarily directed at boys. Was Marston's message reaching girls? Were they actually reading his comic books? Much of the evidence of female readership is anecdotal, such as Trina Robbins' childhood memories of reading *Wonder Woman* comics.⁸³ *Wonder Woman No. 1* (Summer 1942) included a letter from Helen Wainwright Stelling (Olympic-medalling swimmer and diver), who wrote:

I think WONDER WOMAN is one of the most fascinating stories I have ever read. WONDER WOMAN is just what every girl would like to be – strong and beautiful. WONDER WOMAN'S adventures are thrilling and different. This Amazon girl is so human you can't help loving her! ...Best wishes to WONDER WOMAN; may she become the personal friend of every boy and girl in America!⁸⁴

Limited statistical evidence supports the claim that girls were reading *Wonder Woman* comics. When Gaines administered his mail-in surveys in the spring and summer of 1942, he collected data on who was sending in questionnaires. In the first survey, in the May issue of *Sensation Comics*, 367 boys and 249 girls responded. While girls were a smaller portion of total votes, a higher percentage of girls voted for Wonder Woman as their first choice to join the

⁸¹ Ibid., 137.

⁸² As written by Gloria Steinem in the introduction of Marston et al.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Marston and Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 1*.

Justice Society: nearly ninety percent of girls (223 out of 249) versus about seventy-five percent of boys (277 out of 369).⁸⁵ In the second survey (which asked whether Wonder Woman, “even though a woman,” be allowed to join the Justice Society), of the first 1,801 surveys returned, 1,462 were from boys and 339 were girls. Once again, girls, though a smaller percentage of the total votes, were more supportive of Wonder Woman. Eighty-five percent of boys (1,265 out of 1492) said ‘yes,’ versus ninety-eight percent of girls (333 out of 339).⁸⁶ No steps were taken by Gaines to indicate that this was a representative survey, and in fact, they were probably not.⁸⁷ *Newsweek* reported that a 1944 survey by the Market Research Company of America found that “the percentage of males who read comic books regularly was only slightly higher than the percentage of females, especially among children.”⁸⁸ Even though boys represented a slightly larger share of general comic book readers, the statistics seem to suggest that Wonder Woman resonated more strongly among girls.

Wonder Woman’s appeal to girls as a role model makes sense, but why were boys reading her adventures? Marston’s peers in criticized his theories. “If a woman hero were stronger than a man, she would be even less appealing,” Marston recalled them saying. “Boys wouldn’t stand for *that*; they’d resent the strong gal’s superiority.”⁸⁹ However, Marston believed that Wonder Woman’s superiority *was*, in fact, the very reason for her popularity among boys. She was the answer to every male reader’s unconscious desire to be ruled by women. He writes, “No, I maintained, men actually submit to women now, they do it on the sly with a sheepish grin because they’re ashamed of being ruled by weaklings.”⁹⁰ According to Marston, what boys wanted

⁸⁵ Lepore, 204.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁷ Especially in the second survey, it would seem that girls are underrepresented.

⁸⁸ Here are the results from the Market Research Company of America survey: “The percentage of males who read comic books regularly was only slightly higher than the percentage of females, especially among children: 95% of boys and 91% of girls ages 6-11; 87% of boys and 81% of girls ages 12-17; 41% of men and 28% of women ages 18-30; and 16% of men and 12% of women age 31 and over. In addition to these regular readers, the survey estimated that an additional 13% of men and 10% of men over 18 were occasional readers.” As summarized by Finn, 20.

⁸⁹ Marston, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

was a strong, sexy woman who could teach them how fun it was to submit. And Wonder Woman, with her penchant for getting tied up, was just what the doctor ordered.

PART III: A LITTLE TIED UP AT THE MOMENT

In February 1943, Josette Frank, another member of DC Editorial Advisory Board and an adviser to the Children's Book Committee of the Child Study Association,⁹¹ sent a letter to Gaines voicing her grave concerns about Wonder Woman:

As you know, I have never been enthusiastic about this feature. I know your circulation features prove that a lot of other people *are* enthusiastic. Nevertheless, this feature does lay you open to considerable criticism from any such group as ours, partly on the basis of the woman's costume (or lack of it), and partly on the *basis of sadistic bits showing women chained, tortured, etc.* I wish you would take these criticisms very seriously because they have now come to me from several sources.⁹²

Frank was not alone. University of Pennsylvania Professor W.W.D. Sones agreed with Frank that "the bondage idea seemed to dominate the story,"⁹³ and Dorothy Roubicek, a member of Wonder Woman's editorial staff, also raised concerns about the prevalence of the bondage imagery in Wonder Woman.⁹⁴ Irritated, Marston responded to these criticisms in a four-page letter to Gaines dated February 20, 1943. He quickly brushes aside Roubicek's concerns in a patronizing manner:

Of course I wouldn't expect Miss Roubicek to understand all this. After all I have devoted my entire life to working out psychologist principles. Miss R. has been in comic only 6 months or so, hasn't she? And never in psychology.⁹⁵

Frank gets off less easily. Calling her "an avowed enemy of the Wonder Woman strip," Marston claims that that he could find countless experts and parents who "consider Wonder Woman a remarkably wholesome and constructive story strip good for kids in every way."⁹⁶ He goes on to address specifically Frank's claims of sadism:

This, my dear friend, is the one truly great contribution of my *Wonder Woman* strip to the moral education of the young. The only hope for peace is to teach people who are full of pep and bound to *enjoy* being bound – enjoy submission to kind authority, wise authority,

⁹¹ Jill Lepore, "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman," *Smithsonian Magazine*, Oct. 2014.

⁹² Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, 237. Parts also found in Sergi.

⁹³ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 53.

⁹⁴ Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, 237.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

not merely tolerate such submission. Wars will only cease when humans *enjoy being bound*. And because it is a universal truth, a fundamental, subconscious feeling of normal humans, the children love it.⁹⁷

Marston, the avowed feminist, sincerely believed that feminine supremacy was their superior ability to *like* being bound and submitting to superiors. Despite being told by two actual women that no, in fact, they did not like the bondage in *Wonder Woman*, Marston was adamant. This was the basis of his DISC theory; this was the culmination of his life's study. He, better than women themselves, knew that they enjoy being bound by a loving superior. Josette Frank resigned from the Editorial Advisory Board.⁹⁸

Gaines worried about the controversy, but he loved the sales. He left Marston run with his bondage imagery, which Marston described to Peter in great detail in his notes directing the comic's art. This is a sample of Marston's notes to Peter in for *Wonder Woman No. 2* (Fall 1942), for a storyline about Mars, the God of War, explaining the scene in which Wonder Woman is captured:

Closeup, full-length figure of WW. Do some careful chaining here – Mars' men are experts! Put a metal collar on WW with a chain running off from the panel, as though she were chained in a line of prisoners. Have her hands clasped together at her breast with **double** bands on her wrists, her Amazon bracelets and another set. Between these runs a short chain, about the length of a handcuff – this is what compels her to clasp her hands together. Then put another, heavier, larger chain between her wrist bands which hands in a long loop to just above her knees. At her ankles show a pair of arms and hands, coming from out of the panel, clasping about her ankles. This whole panel will lose its point and spoil the story unless these chains are drawn **exactly** as described here.⁹⁹

Gaines hired Laretta Bender, associate professor of psychiatry at the medical school at New York University and a psychiatrist in the children's ward at Bellevue Hospital, to replace Frank on the Advisory Board.¹⁰⁰ She did not see the *Wonder Woman* comics as sadistic. Gaines' anxieties were quieted. That is, until September 13, 1943, when a letter for Marston came across

⁹⁷ Ibid., 238. Parts also found in Alder, 193.

⁹⁸ Sergi.

⁹⁹ Lepore, "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Gaines' desk from John D. Jacobs, an infantryman stationed in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.¹⁰¹

Mr. Jacobs wrote:

I am one of those odd, perhaps unfortunate men who derive an extreme erotic pleasure from the mere thought of a beautiful girl, chained or bound, or masked, or wearing extreme high-heels or high-laced boots – in fact, any sort of constriction or strain whatsoever...Have you the same interest in bonds and fetter that I have?¹⁰²

This was Gaines' worst fear – a scandal. This was a grown man professing to be aroused by bondage imagery in his comic book *for children*. He sent the letter to Marston, which a note attached. "Dear Doc," he writes. "This is one of things I've been afraid of, (without quite being able to put my finger on it) in my discussions with you regarding Miss Frank's suggestions to eliminate chains." He had Roubicek draft a list of ways that the use of chains could be "cut down...by at least 50 to 75% without at all interfering with the excitement of the story or the sales of the books."¹⁰³

Marston did not find the sergeant's letter troubling at all. He responded to Gaines, "I have the good sergeant's letter in which he expresses his enthusiasm over chains for women – so what?" He understood that people perceived Wonder Woman this way. "You can't have a real woman character in any form of fiction without touching off many readers' erotic fantasies. Which is swell, I say – harmless erotic fantasies are now generally recognized as good for people."¹⁰⁴

In Marston's mind, the bondage featured in Wonder Woman was part of what made her so popular. Marston did not make a move to change Wonder Woman, and Gaines eventually stopped pressuring him.

To figure out whether *Wonder Woman's* bondage indeed contributed to her popularity, it is important to know what Marston believed it represented in the comic books. That is, was Wonder Woman's bondage actually sexual or a benign metaphor for submitting to authority? For Marston, the distinction was nonexistent, a subtlety that likely escaped most of his readers as it would require an understanding his psychological work. The overlap between comic book

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 53.

¹⁰³ M.C. Gaines, "Letter to William Moulton Marston," September 14, 1943.

¹⁰⁴ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*.

audiences and readers of relatively unknown psychological studies is very small. "Without a sound foundation and training in 'sex love,'" Marston once said, "No human being of either sex can possibly submit to any social control and like it."¹⁰⁵ Rather than thinking these mature themes were inappropriate for a children's comic, he seemed to think that he was doing a public service by educating the youth, particularly boys, about the joy of submitting to a loving authority. Marston knew that the majority of his audience was male, and he saw his comic books as a 'primer' of sorts. Mayer (one of his editors) once said that he believed Marston "was writing a feminist book, but not for women. He was dealing with a male audience."¹⁰⁶

To the credit of Marston's critics, there is an overwhelming amount of bondage in *Wonder Woman* comics. Nearly every issue finds Wonder Woman held captive by chains, cages, straitjackets and very often her own 'unbreakable' golden lasso (How many times does that have to happen before you rethink your weapon choice? Apparently a lot, because Wonder Woman still uses the lasso to this day. Usually her bounds are ordinary ropes and (very often) chains, but Marston often gets inventive about how he ties up his superheroine. At one point, she is encased a block of solid gold.¹⁰⁷ In *Wonder Woman No. 6* (Fall 1943), Wonder Woman puts on a benefit performance where she performs a feat called "The Ordeal of A Thousand Links," where she is bound with 1,000 links of chains, as well "the famous 'brink' – a leather mask worn by women in St. Lazare Prison, France. It covers the entire face and muffles the prisoner's voice," a "wide iron collar...from Tibet – it prevents the prisoner from bending his head," and an "ancient creek manacle [that] clamps the ankles firmly together."¹⁰⁸ She must escape from the bonds while being submerged in a tank of water.

Marston claimed that he wanted the bondage to demonstrate the joy of submitting to a loving superior. Frequently, Wonder Woman is shown enjoying her bonds or teaching other

¹⁰⁵ Bunn, "The Lie Detector, Wonder Woman and Liberty: The Life and Work of William Moulton Marston," 105.

¹⁰⁶ Daniels and Kidd, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 35.

¹⁰⁸ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 6 " 111-2.

characters to enjoy theirs. Bondage is a beloved tradition on Paradise Island. On Diana's Day, which is like the Amazons' Christmas, one Amazon is chosen to be the goddess and wears a silver mask. The girls try to steal her mask, and those who fail are tied up. The next day, the losers dress like deer and are hunted, tied up again, and "baked" into a pie.¹⁰⁹ Chains are part of Amazon training. The Amazon girls say about their bonds, "Oh yes, we love it! Chains are part of our training – carrying them constantly makes us stronger!"¹¹⁰ The Amazons use chains to retrain prisoners on their prison, Reform Island, to teach their captives about how to love being obedient and submitting to authority. Many of the prisoners seem reluctant to remove their chains.¹¹¹ After capturing one of her arch-nemeses, the Cheetah, Wonder Woman says, "Amazon chains will make the Cheetah a good girl."¹¹²

When it was not a loving authority that bound Wonder Woman – when it was a villain – she always freed herself. Lepore draws a connection between this breaking bonds imagery featured in Wonder Woman and similar images that crop up in suffragist cartoons of the early twentieth century. Almost unbelievably, Marston and Wonder Woman again find themselves at the middle of another pivotal moment of the twentieth century: the suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. Before he drew Wonder Woman, H.G. Peter contributed art to "The Modern Woman," the suffrage page of *Judge Magazine*, where he worked as a staff artist. The regular artist for the page was Lou Rogers, who was one of the main cartoonists who depicted suffragists breaking out of chains. Rogers went on to work with Margaret Sanger, Olive Bryne's aunt.¹¹³ Bondage had multiple layers of meaning in *Wonder Woman*, and in Marston's mind, it was not completely contradictory to have sexy, erotic BDSM bondage be represented in the same image as suffragist bondage. Bondage to a loving superior was to be enjoyed; otherwise bonds should be broken.

¹⁰⁹ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 3," 97-102.

¹¹⁰ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 6 " 141.

¹¹¹ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," 177.

¹¹² Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 6 " 152.

¹¹³ Lepore, "The Surprising Origin Story of Wonder Woman."

Any time a man ties a woman up; it is always against her will, whether it is Mars chaining his slave girls or Dr. Psycho chaining his wife, Marva.¹¹⁴ This is not submission to a loving superior, and thus, the bonds should be broken. This aligns with Marston's DISC theory; men had a tendency to *dominate* instead of *induce*, which is an *antagonistic* relationship. The Amazons wear their bullet-deflecting bracelets to remind them what happened when Hercules' men enslaved them. If a man welds chains between the bracelets, they lose all of their Amazon powers.¹¹⁵ Marston's metaphor is unmistakably clear: man's rule over woman was unhealthy and unnatural.

One particularly striking example contrasting women bonding men as beneficial, but men bonding women as harmful is featured in "The Rubber Barons" in *Wonder Woman No. 4*. Ivar Torgson, a rubber magnate, refuses to cooperate with the U.S. government, in spite of a wartime rubber shortage, and Elva Dove, who is in love with him, spies in the U.S. Army Intelligence Office for him. When Elva discovers that Ivar does not think much of her ("Most men secretly think of women that way in this man-ruled world," Wonder Woman says), she is heartbroken, but Wonder Woman teaches her how to control her man. "First, you dress like a queen," Wonder Woman advises. "Then act the part – and with my magic lasso make Ivar submit to your wishes. He'll love it! When he's learned to enjoy being your captive, you can control him without any lasso." Marston narrates, "Ivar discovers – to his amazement – that he enjoys being this girl's captive!" He proposes, and Elva melts, removing his chains and promising to be his loving wife. Once Elva submits to Ivar's domination, he reverts back into the cruel brute he was, pushing her down to the ground. "It's my fault," Elva exclaims when Wonder Woman finds her, bound by Ivar. "I thought he'd love me more if he ruled me!" Wonder Woman replies, "Many girls make that mistake."¹¹⁶

Wonder Woman's reoccurring domination narrative and bondage imagery is the worst kept secret in comic book history, mostly because Marston himself could not stop talking about it,

¹¹⁴ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 5," 55, 41.

¹¹⁵ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 2," 58.

¹¹⁶ Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 4," 211-213.

loudly and publicly, as was his style. On August 14, 1942, in other one of his interviews with “Olive Richard” for *Family Circle*, a piece called “Our Woman Are Our Future,” he explained the psychological reason why he believed Wonder Woman as a strong, dominating woman was so appealing to boys:

Boys, young and old, satisfy their wish thoughts by reading comics. If they go crazy over Wonder Woman, it means they're longing for a beautiful, exciting girl who's stronger than they are. Normal men retain their childish longing for a woman to mother them. At adolescence a new desire is added. They want a girl to allure them. When you put these two together, you have the typical male yearning that Wonder Woman satisfies.¹¹⁷

Was there any truth to Marston's theory that Wonder Woman's popularity can be attributed to the bondage? What about his claim that boys were drawn to Wonder Woman because they secretly wished to be dominated?¹¹⁸ The comics were popular, and comics in general, as we have previously established, were being read more by boys, so transitively, the comics were popular among boys. It is hard to believe that boys, or even men, were picking up on the level of subtext that Marston layered in Wonder Woman, even though he was making it fairly obvious for anyone paying the least bit attention to him.

In Gaines' spring 1942 survey, he collected data on not only the gender of respondents, but also their age; 46 boys under age 10 replied, 185 between ages 10 to 12, and 136 were over 12. In those categories, 80% of boys under 10 chose Wonder Woman as their first choice, 69% of boys ages 10 to 12, and 82% of boys over 12. For the oldest boys (and adults), the male group among which she was the most popular, yes, Wonder Woman undoubtedly had sex appeal, (even though H.G. Peter's depiction of the Amazon superheroine is nothing compared to today's oversexed version); that is a widely accepted phenomenon. “Wonder Woman has always had female fans who admire her strength and her intelligence,” writes modern-day novelist and Wonder Woman author Jodi Picoult, “But she has male readers too, who admire – well – her

¹¹⁷ Olive Richard, “Our Woman Are Our Future,” *Family Circle*, Aug. 14, 1942.

¹¹⁸ Marston's comments ironically assume heteronormativity, even though his psychological work (see Chapter 2) is very accepting of “female love” relationships. When this thesis says ‘boys,’ the term refers to all those boys and *the some girls* who may have been reading *Wonder Woman* because of her sex appeal. For the sake of flow, we won't specify this every time.

breasts.”¹¹⁹ Whether Marston’s bondage imagery probably did not have all the elaborate effects that he wanted it to, but considering that Wonder Woman’s sex appeal is undeniably tied up (pun intended) with the excessive bondage imagery, it is likely that this is part of what drew male readers. “It was a bait and switch,” argues Tim Hanley. “Playing on male desires with the bondage to bring them in and then hitting them with his metaphors and messages about female superiority.”¹²⁰

What about her younger fans? While young girls could look to Wonder Woman as a role model, especially her ability to break out of her bonds every time (symbolically liberating herself), why may she have been popular among young boys? For this demographic, the appeal of Wonder Woman may have just been the same as any other superhero – her amazing powers and her exciting adventures, of which bondage just happened to be a part. Without understanding the nuanced psychological subtext that Marston attached to it, young readers may have been responding to the non-sexual themes associated with bondage – themes with common, human appeal, like thrill seeking and power dynamics. Wonder Woman’s popularity indicates that she struck a chord with her World War II audiences. The bondage made Wonder Woman stand out, but readers might not have been responding to Wonder Woman the way that Marston believed they were.

PART IV: WONDER WOMAN WITHOUT MARSTON

Would any superheroine have been popular during World War II or was Wonder Woman’s appeal special? A true determinist certainly would think none of Wonder Woman’s peculiar philosophies, instilled by Marston, really mattered. What ultimately mattered was that Wonder Woman was a female superheroine. The war had set the stage for a female comic book hero, and any that debuted during World War II would have captured the nation’s attention.

Yet Marston’s vision is what elevated Wonder Woman from the pack. It is doubtful that without him, Wonder Woman would have captivated her audience in the same way. Is it even

¹¹⁹ Jodi Picoult, "The Evolution Of Wonder Woman," *Playboy* 2009.

¹²⁰ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 56.

possible to prove this contention? History rarely allows us the opportunity to cleanly isolate one causal factor from the other. In this case, there have been a handful of events that suggest that Wonder Woman would not have been nearly as popular without Marston as a driving force.

The Other Wonder Women

First of all, Wonder Woman was not the only superheroine to debut during the 1940s, but she was unmatched in popularity, which would lead one to conclude that not *any* superheroine would have succeeded. While the identity of the first comic book superheroine depends on one's criteria, many historians point to Fantomah, a goddess-like woman who protects her jungle with omnipotent powers, who first appeared in February 1940 in *Jungle Comics* (Fiction House). Neither she nor Amazona, the Mighty Woman (a superpowered Amazon who appears in March 1940 – more than a year before Wonder Woman!) is “heroic” in the classic sense of fighting crime, which perhaps accounts for their lack of appeal and relatively short-lived existences.^{121 122} Before Wonder Woman, there is a surprising number of little known crime-fighting women, both superpowered and nonpowered, including Lady Luck (June 1940), Invisible Scarlet O'Neil (June 1940), the Red Tornado/“Ma” Hunkel (November 1940), Miss Fury (April 1941) and the Spider Queen (September 1941).¹²³ None were particularly memorable; most were short-lived, and all have faded into obscurity.¹²⁴

Each of Wonder Woman's contemporaries roughly fit into one of three categories, which help explain their failure and Wonder Woman's success. The first two categories illustrate how Marston made Wonder Woman novel, compared to her contemporaries. Firstly, many of Wonder Woman's predecessors/peers of the 1940's were female counterparts to male heroes – weaker,

¹²¹ As writer D.M. Higgins elaborates, who you label the first superheroine depends on “whether you think 'superhero' means super-powered or just masked/costumed, whether that includes vengeful antiheroes, and whether 'comics' includes newspaper strips.” See D.M. Higgins, “Wait, who came before Ma Hunkel then?”, Superdames.org (accessed Jan. 4, 2014).

¹²² Fantomah ran from 1940-1944, but she had lost all of her superpowers by 1942. Amazona, on the other hand, only ever made one appearance. See Mike Madrid, *Divas, Dames & Daredevils: Lost Heroines of Golden Age Comics* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2013).

¹²³ Dates and descriptions of superheroes in this section are adapted from these two sources. See Richard Cook, “Classic and Not-So-Classic Superheroines: A Brief History in Covers and Panels” (accessed Jan. 12, 2014); see also Higgins.

¹²⁴ Spider Queen only lasted three issues. The longest running of these was the Invisible Scarlet O'Neil, who made her final comic strip appearance in 1956.

second-rate versions of the male counterpart – overshadowed by their more powerful better halves. The inequality is demonstrated in the names themselves. As comic book historian Trina Robbins points out, with the exception of Captain Marvel’s Mary Marvel, these superheroines were usually “girl” to their counterparts’ “man” – like Bulletman’s Bulletgirl (May 1941) and Hawkman’s Hawkgirl (June 1941).¹²⁵ Wonder Woman was independent, powerful in her own right, which made her a much more compelling character.

Secondly, when they *were* independent, many female characters were antiheroes. Catwoman (Spring 1940), the love interest of Batman, is a morally ambiguous petty thief. The Black Widow (August 1940) and Madam Satan (May 1941) both take down bad guys, but it is to deliver them to their master, Satan. Lady Satan (December 1941 – the same month as Wonder Woman) is a vengeful femme fatale in a slinky evening gown. The idea that a woman cannot be powerful and good at the same time lends credence to Danny Fingeroth’s argument in his book *Superman on the Couch*, in which he states:

Up until the 1990’s, in pop culture, if a woman was powerful - really powerful - she was either evil, or made evil by the power...*With the notable exception of Wonder Woman, who was good and was powerful*, there hadn’t been a successful, superheroine who was femme but not fatale.”¹²⁶ [emphasis added]

Fingeroth suggests that perhaps this phenomenon existed because society was not ready for a powerful, good woman. Wonder Woman’s success, however, contradicts this conclusion. If there was any time in the twentieth century when the nation hungered for a good and powerful superheroine, it was World War II, an event that produced strong, hardworking Rosie the Riveters and sweet pin-up girls. The problem was really that no one, until Marston, had been crazy enough to try it.

The third category of Wonder Woman’s contemporaries is the knockoffs – a handful of patriotic, independent superheroines that appear similar enough to Wonder Woman that they could actually be competition. Miss Victory (August 1941) was government stenographer Joan Wayne, with super-strength and endurance, who donned a tight red white and blue costume to

¹²⁵ Trina Robbins, "Women In Comics: An Introductory Guide", National Association of Comic Art Educators (accessed Jan. 12, 2015).

¹²⁶ Fingeroth, 80.

fight against “organized bands of corrupt politicians and diplomats [who] have been operating against the best interests of the government in Washington.”¹²⁷ Sound familiar? Yet Miss Victory, who predates Wonder Woman, never came close to her popularity and barely even survived the war. (Her last appearance is in 1946.) The same month (August 1941) also saw the debut of Miss America, otherwise known as reporter Joan Dale, who was given superpowers to fight evil by the Statute of Liberty. She only lasts seven issues. Another comic book publisher tried its own version of Miss America in November 1943 – Madeline Joyce, a rich heiress who received superpowers in a bizarre science experiment.¹²⁸ Both versions of Miss America wear a patriotic costume like Wonder Woman. Liberty Belle, whose alter ego was Libby Lawrence, the daughter of a U.S. general slain by Nazis, was so patriotic that she was not only named after the iconic bell of American history, but her superpowers were triggered by its ringing. She never appears on a comic book cover, and she disappears after 1947.¹²⁹ Miss Victory, Miss America, Liberty Belle – what separated Wonder Woman from these fellow red-white-and-blue sporting defenders of American freedom? The answer: Marston and his bizarre theories that elevated Wonder Woman from another run-of-the-mill superheroine to a feminist icon and sex symbol.

Wonder Woman and the Justice Society

One episode in Wonder Woman’s history is particularly telling when it comes to answering if Wonder Woman would have been as popular during World War II without Marston. When Wonder Woman was inducted into the Justice Society after the readers’ poll in 1942, she was not written by Marston, but another writer named Gardner Fox. In *All-Star Comics No. 13* (October 1942), she appears with the men of the Justice Society and impresses them so much that at the end of the issue, they offer her the position of *secretary*. “I don’t think I was so thrilled in my life,” the Amazon princess says.¹³⁰ Who is this woman, and what has she done with Wonder Woman? In the next issue, she is introduced as the team’s

¹²⁷ *Encyclopedia of Golden Age Superheroes*, s.v. "Miss Victory."

¹²⁸ Scott Tipton, "Born on the Fourth of July" (accessed Jan. 12, 2015).

¹²⁹ Donald D. Markstein, "Liberty Belle" (accessed Jan. 12, 2015).

¹³⁰ Gardner Fox, *All Star Comics No. 13* (DC Comics 1942).

secretary in the letterhead. “Unfortunately as secretary and honorary member I have to remain behind,” she tells the boys before they leave for a mission in Europe. “But I’ll be with you in spirit!”¹³¹

The decision to make Wonder Woman the secretary of the Justice League demonstrates that without Marston’s driving feminist (or whatever you want to call it) vision, Wonder Woman would have been a less compelling character. “Fox just couldn’t think of anything for Wonder Woman to do except to type the meeting minutes and answer the phone,” Jill Lepore commented in an interview with Comic Book Resources News. “You almost expect her to put on an apron and start dusting.”¹³² Compare that to Marston, who “had Wonder Woman do everything. She organizes boycotts, she tells women to leave their husbands, she runs for president.”¹³³ In her adventures with the Justice Society, she is constantly left behind. Without Marston, Wonder Woman was a bore.

Ironically, Marston was to blame for this dull version of Wonder Woman. After one of her initial appearances with the Justice Society, an angry Marston demanded and received complete creative control over Wonder Woman in the storylines. However, as Tim Hanley explains: “Seeing as he and H.G. Peter were busy producing Wonder Woman stories for *Wonder Woman*, *Sensation Comics*, AND *Comic Cavalcade*, it ended up that *All-Star Comics* fell by the wayside.”¹³⁴ Wonder Woman without Marston, subject only by the time period, did not have the same appeal and fell into traditional gender ideologies. While the Justice Society adventures were popular, Wonder Woman did not contribute to that popularity. She was essentially written out of the Justice Society storylines because Fox could not think of anything else for her to do. Wonder Woman’s popularity was only possible with the combination of both Marston’s philosophies and the traditional gender ideologies of World War II. Wonder Woman’s relegation to the secretarial

¹³¹ Gardner Fox, *All Star Comics No. 14* (DC Comics 1942).

¹³² Lepore, as interviewed by Alex Dueben, "Jill Lepore Reveals 'The Secret History of Wonder Woman'" (accessed Jan. 12, 2014).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Tim Hanley, "Wonder Woman: Secretary Of The Justice Society Of America", Wordpress (accessed Jan 12, 2014).

position in the Justice Society was just a foreshadowing of that was to come for Wonder Woman in the postwar era.

The Wonder Woman Team Moves On?

In a short time, Wonder Woman would have to go on without Dr. William Moulton Marston, for real. Soon after the war ended, in 1947, Dr. William Moulton Marston died of lung cancer.¹³⁵ Almost simultaneously, and without warning, Wonder Woman lost her two biggest influences – World War II and Marston.

In 1946, Gaines, Wonder Woman's former publisher, left DC Comics and started a new publishing company, EC Comics after he was bought out, losing the rights to Wonder Woman in the process.¹³⁶ The same year that Marston died, Gaines teamed up with Dorothy Roubicek, former editor of Wonder Woman to debut Moon Girl. As Brian Cronin articulates, "Moon Girl was essentially the same as Wonder Woman: she was from another land and won a contest to leave her kingdom to go fight crime in America."¹³⁷ However, Marston's team, without Marston, could not replicate Wonder Woman's magic. She was not popular. After the first seven issues, EC Comics renamed the title *Moon Girl Fights Crime* to appeal to the fad of crime comics. By the ninth issue, EC Comics revamped *Moon Girl* again into a romance story – *A Moon, A Girl... Romance*, it was called. After twelve issues, EC Comics gave up on Moon Girl.¹³⁸

To an extent, Moon Girl's multiple personalities demonstrate how crucial Marston's eccentric mission was to focusing Wonder Woman and creating a character with consistency during the war years. However, by this point, in 1947, Marston's absence was not the only variable. The end of the war brought a call for the return of normalcy and wave of backlash against the disruptions of wartime, which obliterated the appeal of a female superhero. Wonder Woman fell in the same Marston-less, war-less trap as Moon Girl. Wonder Woman fell wholly

¹³⁵ This, 36.

¹³⁶ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, eds., *Cons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 221.

¹³⁷ Brian Cronin, *Was Superman A Spy? And Other Comic Book Legends Revealed* (New York: Plume, 2009), 213.

¹³⁸ 49

victim to the whims of the changing times, losing her radical roots just as average American women were retreating back into the home. In the next chapter, we will examine the one foe that Wonder Woman could not beat: postwar conservatism.

Chapter 4

Wonder Woman's Postwar Demise

“THE LESBIAN COUNTERPART OF BATMAN”

In 1954, one mild-mannered German-American psychologist did what nary a supervillain had been able to do for more than a decade: he took down all the big name superheroes – Wonder Woman, Superman and Batman – in one fell swoop. Giving new meaning to the old adage, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword,’ Wertham authored a book – *Seduction of the Innocent* – that changed the industry forever by spurring a nationwide crusade against comic books.

Like Marston, Wertham was a psychologist who believed in the powerful effects of comic books, especially on juvenile audiences. Unlike Marston, however, he vehemently maintained that this influence was not a positive one. A relentless crusader against comics, Wertham argued in his book that comic books were a cause of juvenile delinquency. Comic book superheroes perpetuated immorality by glorifying violence and promoting deviant sexual behaviors. Batman and Robin were gay lovers. Superman, with the giant ‘S’ on his spandex costume, was one ‘S’ away from the Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS).¹ Wonder Woman, in particular, was a great source of ire for Wertham. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, he writes:

¹ David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 236.

The Lesbian counterpart of Batman may be found in the stories of Wonder Woman and Black Cat. The homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable. For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image. For girls she is a morbid ideal. Where Batman is anti-feminine, the attractive Wonder Woman and her counterparts are definitely anti-masculine.

In particular, Wertham takes great issue with Wonder Woman's relationship with the Holliday girls, her cohort of Beta Lambda sorority sisters from Holliday College, who often help her save the day. He is alarmed by the girls' homosexual suggestiveness and by their behavior and attitude towards violence, which is unbecoming for girls:

Her followers are the "Holliday Girls," i.e. the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls. Wonder Woman refers to them as "my girls." Their attitude about death and murder is a mixture of the callousness of crime comics with the coyness of sweet little girls.

Wertham's book fed into the moral panic that overtook the comic book industry in the 1950s. The same year that *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, the Comics Magazine Association of America, the industry's trade group, established the Comics Code Authority, a set of regulations that allowed the industry to self-regulate, in lieu of government oversight.²

Wertham was vocal about his views, but not unique. His crusade against comic books was a manifestation of the wave of postwar conservatism that descended on American society. After World War II, messages urging a return to normalcy pervaded popular culture. The dominant public discourse ushered women back into the domestic sphere and ended the social acceptability of their temporary empowerment during the war. Wonder Woman was caught in the middle of the reversion from the empowered woman of World War II to the housewife of the 1950s.

Wonder Woman's postwar demise confirms the argument this thesis has presented up to this point: Wonder Woman's popularity was a combination of right time and right creator. She needed both the interruption of World War II and the radicalness of Marston's vision to become as popular as she did. With the end of the war in 1945 and the death of Marston in 1947, she lost

² Ruth McClelland-Nugent, "The Amazon Mystique: Subverting Cold War Domesticity in Wonder Woman Comics, 1948-1965," in *Comic Books and the Cold War, 1946-1962: Essays on Graphic Treatment of Communism, The Code and Social Concerns*, ed. Chris York and Rafael York (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 5.

both of those strong influences in a relatively short period of time, leaving her vulnerable to the conservative backlash of the period. This chapter's story of the postwar demise of Wonder Woman demonstrates the extent to which what happened during World War II was truly an extraordinary occurrence.

This chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section examines what the dominant public discourse surrounding the feminine identity was *after* the war and analyzes how this discourse was represented in popular culture. The second section focuses on what was going on behind the scenes of Wonder Woman: how the postwar conservative climate fomented moral panic in the comic book industry and what changes had occurred to Wonder Woman's editorial team post-Marston. The third section explores how these changes were depicted in the *Wonder Woman* comics themselves from the postwar period.



PART I: NOT-SO WONDER WOMEN

Business As Usual

Time to get the facts straight: before we delve into how women were *presented* postwar, what was *actually* going on with them? Patterns of postwar female employment suggest two seemingly contradictory phenomena - a resurgence of the prewar sexual division of labor, but at the same time, a rise in overall female participation in the workforce. This apparent contradiction is reconciled by the fact that when women entered the workplace, it was in traditionally feminine paid work, no longer in the male dominated industries they flocked to during the war.

Immediately after the war, women's participation in "men's work," like manufacturing, decreased. Clara Schloss and Ella Polinsky of the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in just the month following the end of the war, the number of women employed in manufacturing industries decreased by 675,000, dropping from 3,882,000 to 3,207,000. By February 1946, only 2,934,000 female factory workers remained employed, although employment did bounce back. By November, 3,265,000 women were employed in

manufacturing, but this number was still lower than what it was at the end of the war. Overall, the report determined, “women have retained 1 million of the 2½ million additional production jobs which they acquired in the period from October 1939 to the war peak in November 1943.”³

The Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor surveyed women in 1946 and found that 75 percent of wartime-employed women intended to continue working after the war, yet many women were forced out of their factory jobs by returning veterans and a decrease in the demand for the war goods they were producing.⁴ The ‘demobilization’ of wartime production disproportionately affected women. Lay-offs directly after VJ-Day targeted women at almost double the rate of men (175 out of every 1,000 women lost their job).⁵

However, it is a common misconception that the postwar era completely reversed the trends of the war. In fact, after an initial drop in female employment rates in the immediate aftermath of the war, women’s numbers began to increase. Women continued to go to work, in greater numbers than ever before. According to William Chafe, “in 1960, twice as many women were at work as in 1940, and 40 percent of all women over sixteen held a job.”⁶ The difference during the postwar period was that women were once again excluded from the high-paying factory jobs that they had been allowed to take on during the war. Instead, they were re-relegated to “feminine” work - so called “pink collar” jobs (clerical, secretarial, sales, service and domestic positions).⁷ Ruth Milkman’s study of sex typing in the automobile and electric manufacturing industries during and after World War II confirms that the assiduous ideas of the sexual division of labor were reinstated after the war, having been only temporarily suspended during the war.⁸

From Rosie the Riveter to June Cleaver

Why did women leave, returning to “women’s work” whether it be on the job or in the home? While the patterns of women leaving war jobs and the overall number of number working

³ Clara F. Schloss and Ella Polinsky, "Postwar Labor Turn-Over Among Women Factory Workers," *Monthly Labor Review* 64, no. 3 (March 1947): 411.

⁴ Women's Bureau, *Postwar Plans of Women Workers* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1946); "American Women in World War II on the Home Front and Beyond", National World War II Museum (accessed Jan. 24, 2015).

⁵ Schloss and Polinsky, "Postwar Labor Turn-Over Among Women Factory Workers," 411.

⁶ Chafe, 188.

⁷ Elaine Tyler May, "Interview: Elaine Tyler May ", Public Broadcasting Service (accessed Jan. 24, 2015).

⁸ Milkman, 13.

increasing might at first glance seem contradictory, they are united by that persistent ideology of separate spheres – the belief that there were certain types of work at which each gender was innately better. The ideology pervaded the dominant discourse surround the feminine identity *during* the war (even Marston prescribed to it, in his weird way), and it continued to saturate it *after* the war. It caused women to return home after working war jobs, and when women continued to participate in the workplace, it caused their work to be limited to that which could be associated with their ‘natural’ work in the home - tasks like cooking, cleaning, serving and nurturing. And it caused Wonder Woman to lose her radical edge, fading from the strong, independent superheroine she had been during the war into an empty, love-obsessed girl.

“When did women decide to give up the world and go back home?” asks Betty Friedan in her famous treatise on the listless dissatisfaction of the 1950s housewife, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).⁹ She traces “the problem with no name” back to this phenomenon of women leaving the workforce after World War II.¹⁰ According to Friedan, soon thereafter, the idea that women should be wholly fulfilled by their femininity – by performing her feminine duties of taking care of her husband, children and home overtook the public consciousness. “In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture,” Friedan writes.¹¹ The feminine mystique of the 1950s, she argues, is what caused women to retreat back into the home in the postwar period.

Compare the feminine mystique to Marston’s essentialist philosophies of female supremacy, and it is striking that the two concepts both use essentialism to reach completely opposite conclusions about women’s potential – Friedan writes of the feminine mystique, “The root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and maternal love.”¹² Marston and Friedan might have not agreed, but the fact that similar concepts about masculinity/femininity permeated both of their works further proves that

⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York,: Norton, 1963), 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

Marston had tapped into and resonated with a larger discourse about gender with his essentialist heroine.

Friedan specifically points to popular culture as the vehicle of disseminating the idea of the feminine mystique. Comparing stories from women's magazines on the eve of World War II and from postwar period, she finds stark differences between the heroines of the stories and their plotlines. In 1939, the women in the stories of *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Home Companion*, were "New Women" with "an aura about them of becoming, of moving into a future that was going to be different from the past."¹³ They were predominantly young career-women and "almost never housewives." In 1939, these working heroines were the ideal. Friedan argues, as this thesis has as well, that popular culture may not always be an accurate representation of history, but it captures the beliefs and values of a society at a particular historical moment. These heroines "reflected the dreams, mirrored the yearning for identity and the sense of possibility that existed for women then," Friedan writes.¹⁴ After 1949, however, the tone of women's magazines changed dramatically, with headlines like "Don't Be Afraid to Marry Young" and "It's a Man's World Maybe" splashed across the pages.¹⁵ "Only one in a hundred heroines had a job; even the young unmarried heroines no longer worked except at snaring a husband," Friedan acidly observes.¹⁶

While Friedan focuses primarily on magazines, her argument applies to numerous popular culture mediums in the postwar period. Advertisements in the major magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post* and *LIFE* magazine glorified the docile mother/housewife and directly marketed household products to her.¹⁷ The popular reader for children, *Dick and Jane*, featured a blonde, pretty mother cooking, shopping and minding the children. Television mothers, like *Leave It To Beaver's* June Cleaver and *Father Knows Best's* Margaret Anderson take care of the house and have dinner

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Courtney Catt, "Trapped in the Kitchen: How Advertising Defined Women's Roles in 1950s America" (Baylor University, 2014), 1.

waiting when their husband gets home from work. From all directions, women were bombarded with popular culture images of the happy housewife who wants nothing more than to take care of her family.

Like Rosie the Riveter, the happy housewife of postwar popular culture romanticized and distorted the reality of women. While many women did stay at home during the decade, they also continued to go to work, in greater numbers than ever before. The American pop culture obsession with the housewife could be understood as a conservative backlash, responding to changing times with a value system that hadn't quite caught up yet.

Mystery writer Dorothy Sayers articulates the problem of postwar femininity with a perception decades ahead of her time. She points out the hypocrisy and obsession of the construction of femininity immediately following the postwar period:

Probably no man has ever troubled to imagine how strange his life would appear to himself if it were unrelentingly assessed in terms of his maleness...If he were vexed by continual advice on how to add a rough male touch to his typing, how to be learned without losing his masculine appeal, how to combine chemical research with seduction...His newspaper would assist him with a 'Men's Corner'...If he gave an interview to a reporter...he would find it recorded in such terms as these: 'Professor Bract, although a distinguished botanist, is not in anyway way an unmanly man. He has, in fact, a wife and seven children'...¹⁸

The fixation on the housewife/mother was rooted in the persistent prewar gender ideology, but was heightened by contemporary events. After two decades of economic depression and war, America was rapidly growing; soldiers were returning home, starting families and finding that they needed new places to live.¹⁹ The renewed emphasis on the domestic in pop culture correlated with the growth of the suburbs – between 1950 and 1948, the percentage of the population living in the suburbs increased from 24 percent to 35 percent of the population.²⁰ The suburban lifestyle encouraged a family model in which the men were the breadwinners and the

¹⁸ "American Women's Dilemma," *LIFE Magazine* June 16, 1947, 112.

¹⁹ Vanessa Martins Lamb, "The 1950's and the 1960's and the American Woman: The transition from the "Housewife" to the Feminist" (Université du Sud Toulon-Var, 2011), 9.

²⁰ Chafe, 186.

women were homemakers.²¹ Isolated in their suburban homes, women were urged to retreat away from the public arena.

However, postwar pop culture was also influenced by international events. “There was an intangible but powerful cultural emphasis on security and family life after World War II that was propelled in considerable degree, by the onset of the atomic age and the tensions and fears associated with the Cold War,” Elaine May Tyler elucidates. In this shaky time, coming out of a harrowing international conflict, normalcy was revered; anything revolutionary was spurned. It was believed that women deviating from their traditional roles would be detrimental to national security. Politicians like senator Joseph McCarthy argued that Communist sympathizers in America were undermining the country from the inside to rattle American confidence.²² Women needed to stay in the home for the good of the nation – to maintain the traditional institution of the family and to raise healthy children that could fight the Soviet Union if that time ever came.²³ The stability of the nation was linked to, in the public mind, the stability of the heterosexual, happy middle-class family with a stay-at-home mom and a working dad. It was a type of “domestic containment” mirroring the Cold War containment strategy that dominated politics of the 1950s.

The housewife may have dominated postwar popular culture and reflected a prominent narrative of the reality of postwar women, but it would be neglectful to argue that it was the whole story. Popular culture reflects an agglomerated reality that promotes broad stereotypes and loses all the subtleties of individual stories. That’s the nature of popular culture – it shows what is popular, to the detriment of not showing what might be marginalized. This is what is problematic about using it as a historical source; it is an incomplete picture. The dominant public discourse during the postwar period (and during the war as well as previously discussed) was very much white, middle-class, heteronormative. In fact, the most-reoccurring criticism of Betty Friedan’s work, heard through revisionist historians like Joanne Meyerowitz, is that the malaise, which Friedan erroneously describes as affecting all women, is in fact only centered on middle-class,

²¹ Lamb, 10.

²² Chafe, 186.

²³ Ibid., 187.

educated, white women.²⁴ These were not the only women of the postwar era; William Chafe observes that women of minorities and lower socioeconomic status did not seem to want to redistribute gender roles, “For such women, a world in which men were able to provide for the family and women had the option of tending the home represented a goal to be sought rather than a fate to be avoided,” Chafe argues.²⁵ Unfortunately, comic books were not written by revisionist historians and focus primarily on the same postwar stereotypes that Friedan does.

Women did not lose *all* the progress that they made during the war, but they did take several steps backwards. In this sense, Wonder Woman embodies this popular narrative of the postwar experience of American women – at least, the white, middle-class women whose images dominate popular culture. She was still strong; she was still saving the world, but important changes in her narrative, including a rewriting of her origin story and the increased presence of the Wonder Woman/Steve Trevor storyline (as we will analyze more in depth in the third section of this chapter), signal a retreat from the war’s relative liberalism.

PART II: PANIC! AT THE COMIC BOOK STORE

The same conservatism of the immediate postwar period that shaped the conversation about “women’s place” in society greatly affected post-WWII comic books. It was a paranoid, reactive atmosphere, with conditions ripe for a moral panic.²⁶ The 1950s not only inspired one moral panic but several (see McCarthyism, rock ‘n’ roll, juvenile delinquents films); comic books were one of the decade’s many targets.²⁷

An entertainment product with a predominantly youth audience, comics books were blamed for juvenile delinquency, a topic of great concern during the postwar period. A distinctive youth culture emerged postwar, which was attributed to the bad influence of consumer

²⁴ Meyerowitz.

²⁵ Chafe, 176.

²⁶ A moral panic is a phrase coined by sociologist Stanley Cohen to describe a social phenomenon in which a large group of people panic after perceiving that a societal norm is under attack. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Sociology and the modern world (London,: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), 1.

²⁷ Hajdu.

entertainment products of America's mass culture, like film and television.²⁸ The concern with juvenile delinquency was a self-fulfilling prophecy; because the press was paying more attention to it, it appeared to be more prevalent than before, and because law enforcement was cracking down on it, the number of arrests was increasing, making it appear as though it was a worsening problem. The comic book was particularly targeted because it represented a challenge to adult authority; whereas schools, libraries and parents selected and bought most reading material for children, children books were purchased and marketed directly to children.²⁹ To give the comic book detractors their due credit, the comics of the immediate postwar (not including *Wonder Woman*) took a noticeably dark turn. EC Comics (the publishing company founded by ex-*Wonder Woman* editor Max "Charlie" Gaines) gained notoriety under Gaines' son, William for its horror and crime comic titles, including *Tales from the Crypt: Grim Fairy Tale*, comic books detailing the ghastly re-imaginings of classic fairy tales.³⁰ Unlike film, which was already subject to censorship by the Motion Picture Production Code (since the 1930s), comic book publishers and writers enjoyed complete discretion over the books' content.³¹

The campaign against comic books started all across the country in the late 1940s at the grassroots level, with what Amy Kiste Nyberg describes as "community decency crusades." She describes them as organic, local occurrences, "often ignited by a Sunday sermon against the evils of comics, suggested by a local librarian who was the guest speaker at a women's club luncheon, or triggered by an article appearing in a popular national magazine or local newspaper."³² In 1948, children in Spencer, West Virginia and Binghamton, New York burned hundreds of comic books while priests, principals and parents looked on. After the publicity to these events, several other cities followed suit.³³

²⁸ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Alex Abad-Santos, "The Insane History of How American Paranoia Ruined and Censored Comic Books," *Vox*, Dec. 15, 2014.

³¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Britannica.com, 2015), s.v. "Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)."

³² Nyberg, 22.

³³ Hajdu, 117.

This is where Frederic Wertham, who was quoted in the beginning of this chapter, comes back into the story. His crusade against comic books originates in his psychological work with juvenile delinquents. He noticed that many juvenile delinquents read comic books, so he surmised that there must be a connection between the two. For the August 1948 issue of *Reader's Digest*, Wertham penned an article called "The Comics...Very Funny!" in which he condemns comic book as the "common denominator" in offending behavior in children.³⁴ Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent*, published six years later, brought his ideas to full fruition and united the disparate grassroots crusades around the country into a full-blown moral panic by giving voice and bringing attention to anxieties concerning comic books.³⁵ In the *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham uses psychological case studies of disturbed juvenile delinquents and excerpts from the offending comics themselves to condemn comic books as "glorify[ing] violence, crime and sadism,"³⁶ deeming them "primers for crime"³⁷ and a "repetition of violence and sexiness which no Freud, Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis ever dreamed would be offered to children."³⁸ These crime comic books invited emulation of the violence, rapes and murders they depicted, which is what was causing the alleged rise in juvenile delinquency. Superhero comics did not fare much better under Wertham's criticisms, from accusing Wonder Woman of being a lesbian to arguing that Superman was like a Nazi.

Wertham's book inspired the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (established in 1953) to launch an investigation into comic books in April 1954.³⁹ The committee conducted three days of hearings on April 21, 22 and June 4 in New York City.⁴⁰ In the course of the hearings, the committee heard the testimonies of twenty-two witnesses and examined thirty-three exhibits.⁴¹ The committee primarily focused on the dark horror and crime fiction, though their

³⁴ Frederic Wertham, "The Comics...Very Funny!," *Reader's Digest* August 1948

³⁵ Michael Bowman and Holly Kathleen Hall, "Ordinance 556: The Comic Book Code Comes to Blytheville, Arkansas," *Communication Law Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 2.

³⁶ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York,: Rinehart, 1954), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ Nyberg, 52.

⁴⁰ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency* 1954.

⁴¹ Nyberg, 52.

decisions would have lasting consequences for superhero comics such as *Wonder Woman* as well. Gaines and the comic book publishers refused to concede that any censorship or regulation of comic books was necessary.⁴² In his testimony, Gaines tried to defend comic books against Wertham's claims. "The truth is that delinquency is a product of the real environment in which a child lives," Gaines argued. "And not of the fiction he reads."⁴³

As a result of the negative attention the Senate committee hearings had brought upon comic books and under threat of government legislation, the comic book industry had to react. After the hearing, the *New York Times* reported that the subcommittee "hope[d] that the comic book industry will dust off, and enforce, a code of good taste that has been lying dormant for years," referring to an unenforced code from the late 1948, put together by the old trade group, Association of Comic Book Magazine Publishers.⁴⁴ In September 1954, comic book publishers⁴⁵ formed a new trade group, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), and a month later, this organization enacted a new code to censor comic book content.⁴⁶ Officially known as the Comics Code Authority, the code was used by the CMAA to review comic books for unsavory or immoral content. If the comic passed inspection, it carried the Comic Code Authority's seal of approval on the front cover. "The CCMA had no legal authority, but it could decide not to put its seal of approval on a book," write Glen Weldon. "And many distributors and stores would not stock a comic book without that seal."⁴⁷

What did all this mean for *Wonder Woman*? While *Wonder Woman* did not have problems with excessive violence or gruesome imagery that the controversial horror comics had, certain provisions of the Code particularly influenced *Wonder Woman* comics in the years after

⁴² When presented by leading Senator Estes Kefauver at the hearings with one of his horror comics' covers depicting a woman with blood dripping from her mouth, Gaines remarked it was in "good taste." See Peter Kihss, "No Harm in Horror, Comics Issuer Says " *New York Times*, April 22, 1954.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hajdu, 129-30; Nona Browns, "Reform of Comic Books Is Spurred By Hearings," *New York Times*, June 13, 1954.

⁴⁵ Gaines initially refused to join, but eventually acquiesced under industry pressure. See Amy Kiste Nyberg, "Comics Code History: The Seal of Approval".

⁴⁶ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, 52.

⁴⁷ Glen Weldon, "Censors and Sensibility: RIP, Comics Code Authority Seal Of Approval, 1954 - 2011," *National Public Radio*, Jan. 27, 2011.

1954: the Code stipulated that “the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage,” and “sex perversion or any interference to the same is strictly forbidden.” Combined with the state of the postwar feminine identity and the prevalent housewife narrative, these regulations amounted to some big changes in Wonder Woman’s narrative in the postwar period. Wonder Woman’s romance with Steve Trevor took the front seat, the bondage imagery took the backseat, and the Holliday girls (and whatever homosexual connotations they may have possessed) completely disappeared. To anyone familiar with Golden Age Wonder Woman, this Wonder Woman was unrecognizable, a shell of her former radical self.

PART III: WONDER WOMAN MEETS HER MATCH

She had taken on Axis spies, shape-shifting misogynists and Mars’ evil henchmen, but the foe to finally take down Wonder Woman was not found on the pages of comic books. It was the postwar movement towards conservatism on all fronts – from politics (Cold War containment) to gender roles (the rekindled cult of domesticity) to media censorship (the Comics Code Authority). These forces of conservatism descended upon Wonder Woman, vulnerable without Marston’s driving vision after his death in 1947, and stripped her of much of her radicalism in the 1950s. While she lost much of her extremism during this time, Wonder Woman never quite fit the mold of the quintessential domestic goddess of 1950s pop culture. Too tame to be a feminist role model but too powerful to be a docile housewife, Wonder Woman had lost herself. She may have embodied contradictory narratives of essentialism and empowerment during the war, but at least she was a feminine force to be reckoned with. Without World War II’s disturbance in gender relations and without Marston’s creative force, Wonder Woman was vulnerable to the tide of conservatism that swept over American society in the postwar period. Her postwar fate highlights just how extraordinary the circumstances that enabled her wartime popularity were.

While the great, impersonal, deterministic forces of history were at work in Wonder Woman’s deterioration, one man was largely responsible for weakening Wonder Woman – Robert Kanigher, Marston’s replacement as *Wonder Woman* writer and editor. When Marston died in

1947, his widow, Holloway, wrote a letter to DC Comics. "Hire me," she proposed.⁴⁸ Who else knew Wonder Woman better than one half of inspiration behind her? Who better to remain faithful to Marston's unique worldview more than his wife, who appeared to share it? Yet in a move emblematic of the postwar period when women were being bombarded with messages to leave the workforce, DC Comics passed over Holloway and gave the position to Kanigher, a comic book writer who had been in the business since the early 1940s and at DC since 1945.⁴⁹ Whereas Marston precisely calculated his *Wonder Woman* stories to represent his feminist and submission theories, Kanigher was less concerned with subtext and more concerned with churning out scripts at a rapid rate. Kanigher holds the distinction of being the most prolific writer in DC Comics' history, having created over thirty thousand pages and twenty seven hundred stories for the company in his four-decade tenure, or about 3.5 percent of the all the pages produced by DC in its seventy-five years of existence.⁵⁰ While his specialty was war comics, he edited and wrote Wonder Woman for twenty-two years and for 159 issues, from *Wonder Woman No. 17* (May/June 1946) to *Wonder Woman No. 176* (May/June 1968).⁵¹

Initially, Kanigher tried to remain faithful to Marston's version of the superheroine. Wonder Woman, however, experienced a decline in sales after the war – affected by the general falling-off of the popularity of comic books.^{52 53} Particularly superhero comics, so closely tied to the war, fell out of fashion, without Nazis or Japanese enemies to fight anymore.⁵⁴ At this point, Kanigher threw Marston's agenda out the window and began turning out as many comics as possible.⁵⁵ Unlike Marston, Kanigher had no ulterior motive when writing his *Wonder Woman* comics. This rote mass production without of the storylines made Wonder Woman more

⁴⁸ Lepore.

⁴⁹ Don Mangus, "In Memory of Robert Kanigher" (accessed Feb. 4, 2015); Paul Kupperberg, "Foreword," in *Wonder Woman: The Amazon Princess Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), 8.

⁵⁰ Kupperberg, 8; Heidi MacDonald, "The 100 Most Prolific DC Comics Writers" (accessed Feb. 3, 2015).

⁵¹ Kupperberg, 8; Grand Comics Database, "Robert Kanigher Search" (accessed Feb. 6, 2015).

⁵² This, 36.

⁵³ Just as reliable sales figures are nearly impossible to pin down during the war, they continued to be so after the war. Comic book publishers did not begin regularly releasing their paid circulation figures until the 1960s. There is a consensus, however, in the secondary literature that *Wonder Woman* sales declined after the war.

⁵⁴ Annessa Ann Babic, *Undoing Glory: Constructions of Gender and Patriotism in Post War US Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: ProQuest, 2011), 168.

⁵⁵ Kupperberg, 8.

susceptible to conforming to the reverting mores of the times. There was no unusual creative energy like Marston to counteract the influence of the message of the dominant public discourse and infuse the superheroine with the radicalism that was characteristic of her portrayal during World War II.

Kanigher's prolificacy and speed emphasized quantity over quality. His stories became increasingly ludicrous – each issue recycled the same mess of nonsensical elements. Marston's stories may have repeated familiar themes, but at least they were based in his (admittedly unique) rationality. Kanigher, on the other hand, just seemed to throw together a random assortment of the same absurd features to bang out an exciting story. Wonder Woman's enemies became laughable – instead of battling human criminals, she fought fake threats like aliens, giants, enormous animals, mythological creatures and dinosaurs.⁵⁶ Kanigher also invented Wonder Girl (Wonder Woman as a preteen/teenager) and later Wonder Tot (Wonder Woman as a child) during this period, and in several issues – the “impossible tales,” the three are featured as a Wonder Family, fighting crime together.⁵⁷ As Paul Kupperberg articulates, “Kanigher endlessly mixed and matched these elements for an infinite variety of stories, each one sillier than the last, but all so fast-paced and action-packed that the young readers of the era scarcely had time to catch their breath, let alone parse the stories for logic.”⁵⁸ Kanigher's *Wonder Woman* stories are less bulky than Marston's verbose prose and read more smoothly, but they are downright comical at times with their vapid plotlines and empty dialogue.

The ridiculousness of Kanigher's superheroine highlights how out of place Wonder Woman, as originally created by Marston, was in the postwar period. Wonder Woman was trying to fit into a world that no longer needed her; she had to change or become discontinued. The wartime society that had created her – that had validated her existence – was gone. What the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ In fact, this ongoing storyline became so confusing that Wonder Girl was introduced to the Teen Titans as a separate character from Wonder Woman, even though they are just different ages of the same superheroine. See Sergi.

⁵⁸ Kupperberg, 10.

dominant public discourse was telling women (regardless of what the statistics were actually indicating was going on), was that what the nation needed after the war was housewives and mothers – a return to normalcy and a strengthening of traditional values against the threat of communism. As Jill Lepore writes, “Wonder Woman followed the hundreds of thousands of American women workers who, when peace came, were told that their labor threatened the stability of the nation.”⁵⁹ There was no place for a strong, independent superheroine anymore.

Kanigher undermined the progressiveness of Marston’s superheroine by putting her in more and more ludicrous situations, like fitting Steve Trevor through the eye of the needle to prove that she was the real Wonder Woman or riding a giant arrow to avoid becoming a charm on a giant’s charm bracelet.⁶⁰ Marston’s stories may have been equally strange, but they also had a message and a sense of purpose that, whether or not one agreed with the message, redeemed the comics from being meaningless silliness. Part of the decline in her postwar popularity likely has to do with the fact that while she attempted to fit in with the dominant public discourse surrounding gender roles, she was disconnected from what was actually going on in the world and with women. She was no longer a superpowered everywoman; she was a superpowered ditz. Tim Hanley makes stunning comparisons between what was really happening with women postwar and what was happening in Wonder Woman that illustrate this point beautifully:

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in December 1955, Wonder Woman was playing baseball with a gorilla and fighting a robot octopus in *Wonder Woman No. 78*. When the Food and Drug administration approved the use of the pill as an oral contraceptive in June 1960, Wonder Woman went to a parade with Steve and fought giant balloon animals brought to life in *Wonder Woman No. 114*. When *The Feminine Mystique* was published in February 1963, Wonder Woman was at a carnival with Steve and was turned into a giant by nefarious aliens in *Wonder Woman No. 136*. The world was changing in many ways, but Wonder Woman wasn’t changing with it.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Lepore.

⁶⁰ Robert Kanigher, Ross Andru, and Mike Esposito, “Wonder Woman No. 102,” in *Wonder Woman: The Amazon Princess Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1958), 138.

Robert Kanigher, Ross Andru, and Mike Esposito, “Wonder Woman No. 106,” in *Wonder Woman: The Amazon Princess Archives* (New York: DC Comics, 1959), 222.

⁶¹ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine*, 150.

While the postwar *Wonder Woman* comics may have turned a blind eye to what was going with the women's movement/women's rights, other current events permeated her narrative, which made her continue, to a degree, to reflect society and resonate with her audience. Significantly, the postwar *Wonder Woman* comics are pervaded with the tensions swirling around the Cold War. Space travel and aliens feature prominently in several storylines. *Wonder Woman* is often fighting alien invaders in space (or, in one of the most absurd storylines of them all – space pterodactyls).⁶² Steve Trevor, who was an army intelligence officer during World War II, now blasts off in rockets on military missions in space, an allusion to the Space Race occurring between the Soviet Union and the United States.⁶³ Of course, the United States is portrayed as ahead – “There's the biggest Earth satellite we've launched yet!” Steve Trevor exclaims to *Wonder Woman* at a testing site.⁶⁴ American preoccupation with the Cold War is also expressed by the atomic bomb's frequent appearances. In his analysis of postwar comics, historian William Savage comments, “The comic book contribution to the folklore centered on the idea of a benign Bomb, a friendly Bomb, a Bomb that would never hurt anybody unless we willed it—and certainly it would never hurt us.”⁶⁵ *Wonder Woman* often deflects atomic bombs fired upon Americans by nameless enemies. They never seem that dangerous; it does not take much for her to beat them. In *Wonder Woman No. 98* (May 1958), she encounters an “enemy” sub that fires an atomic missile. She attempts to redirect it out to deep sea “where it will explode without harm to anyone.”⁶⁶ When the bomb landed onshore, she “fused sand and torpedo into a harmless molten mass,” a tactic of questionable scientific reasoning.⁶⁷

The absence of any illusion to the women's movement and the prevalence of imagery associated with Cold War tensions are not unrelated themes in the postwar *Wonder Woman* comics. *Wonder Woman*'s deterioration was akin to the Cold War strategy of ‘domestic

⁶² Kanigher et al., “*Wonder Woman No. 105*,” 211.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 210; Kanigher et al., “*Wonder Woman No. 99*,” 39.

⁶⁴ Kanigher et al., “*Wonder Woman No. 104*,” 186.

⁶⁵ Savage, 17.

⁶⁶ Kanigher et al., “*Wonder Woman No. 98*,” 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

containment' of women happening across all mediums of postwar popular culture. The most striking evidence of this jumps out immediately at the reader from *Wonder Woman No. 98* (May 1958) onwards. The pages featured sleek, new art – the first issue illustrated by penciller Ross Andru and inker Mike Esposito. Kanigher had hired the artistic duo to replace the aging H.G. Peter, art was not only antiquated at its best, but was also worsening with the artist's advancing age.⁶⁸ Andru and Esposito's *Wonder Woman* was prettier and more feminine than Peter's. Her build was slimmer, more hourglass and less athletic, her eyes were bigger and more doe-like – even dowdy Diana Prince got a makeover, now sporting fashionable cat-eye glasses.⁶⁹

The dramatic shift in *Wonder Woman's* artistic direction, which did not occur until 1958, visually represents the culmination of other "containing" changes that had been building in her narrative over the course of the decade. Some of the changes were subtle, but reflected significant shifts in societal values; for example, Kanigher replaced "Wonder Women of History," a featured biography of a successful woman in each issue of *Wonder Woman*, with extras like "Marriage à la Mode," a feature about wedding customs from around the world and "Curious Courtships," which looked at international courtship traditions.⁷⁰ Other changes were more obvious, the biggest probably being that *Wonder Woman's* love interest, Steve Trevor, gained a much larger role in the postwar stories. Their relationship overtook *Wonder Woman's* adventures until the comic became "a romance comic with a superhero setting."⁷¹ In her relationship with Steve Trevor, we can clearly see *Wonder Woman* lose her radical edge. Like the average woman, pressured to retreat back into the role of housewife, *Wonder Woman* is constantly hounded by Steve Trevor with marriage proposals. Most of the conversations go something like this representative exchange in *Wonder Woman No. 110* (November 1959). "When are you going to marry me?" Steve Trevor says. "I told you a hundred

⁶⁸ Kupperberg, 9.

⁶⁹ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 100," 85.

⁷⁰ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 84; Zechowski, 141; Robert Kanigher, Ross Andru, and Mike Esposito, *Wonder Woman No. 142* (1963).

⁷¹ Kupperberg, 8.

times, Steve! When my services are no longer needed to battle crime and injustice," Wonder Woman replies.^{72 73} Her consistent refusal to marry is like an echo of her original, independent World War II spirit, which once made her popular, but not anymore. Now, it contributed to her postwar ambivalence. Steve Trevor might be asking the 'right' question for the time, but Wonder Woman is not giving the 'right' answer for the time.

Steve Trevor and Wonder Woman's relationship became more heteronormative during the 1950s; Steve Trevor plays the damsel in distress less often, assuming macho, dominant roles more often. "I wish I were going along with you, Steve," Wonder Woman says in *Wonder Woman No. 99* (July 1958) "The inside of a rocket plane...is hardly the place for a beautiful young girl – even if she is an Amazon," Steve replies.⁷⁴ Marston's Wonder Woman would have not stood for that, but Kanigher's Wonder Woman docilely accepts this explanation. A World War II cover features Wonder Woman carrying Steve Trevor, but during the postwar period, she carries different unconscious women away from danger, not Steve Trevor.⁷⁵ Marston's Wonder Woman acts more aloof towards Steve Trevor, not being physically affectionate with him often and leaving him in awe in her dust, while this Wonder Woman rides in Trevor's passenger seat, calls him "darling" and shares kisses with him.⁷⁶

Despite the fact that Wonder Woman lost her edge, she never became the archetypal June Cleaver housewife. She constantly puts her career before marriage.⁷⁷ Every time Steve Trevor proposes, Wonder Woman declines because it would mean she would have to give up helping people. Steve asks Wonder Woman, "Ready to wear my engagement ring?" Without even

⁷² Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 110," 329.

⁷³ This rule that Wonder Woman could be free to marry at some point in the future (Marston forbade it altogether) is a reworking of Kanigher, who did not feel any qualms about straying far from Wonder Woman's original mythology. See McClelland-Nugent, 117.

⁷⁴ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 99," 39.

⁷⁵ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 110," 324; Robert Kanigher and H. G. Peter, *Wonder Woman No. 49* (New York: DC Comics, 1951); Marston and Peter, "Wonder Woman No. 5," 35.

⁷⁶ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 102," 118.

⁷⁷ Zechowski, 140.

answering, Wonder Woman spurns him to save passengers on a broken amusement park ride.⁷⁸ This message is a significant deviation from the cajoling of the dominant public discourse, which emphasized telling women that it was the right choice to give up their careers to take care of their families. Steve Trevor begrudges her career in many instances. “Someday I'll marry that angel! If I can get her to stop in one spot long enough – without her having to answer some SOS or another,” he laments in *Wonder Woman No. 100* (August 1958).⁷⁹ Sharon Zechowski and Caryn Neumann argue that there is a connection between “the public stance Wonder Woman takes against marriage as something that will render her powerless” and Betty Friedan’s work on the malaise of the 1950s housewife: “To some degree she views marriage (not love) as a trap, a theme that foreshadows *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.”⁸⁰ In this regard, Wonder Woman was ahead of her time, but unlike her progressiveness during the interlude of World War II, which was embraced, this message was dismissed during the postwar period, as declining sales indicate.

Still, the foolish plotlines and comparative heteronormativity of postwar Wonder Woman comics suggest that Wonder Woman was conforming to the postwar conservatism and its embodiment in the Comics Code Authority. “As the 1954 code for comics required romantic stories to emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage, Wonder Woman became just another female character, albeit one with a strong right hook,” Zechowski and Neumann articulate.⁸¹ After the Code was established, Wonder Woman’s content was sterilized, and Marston’s extremism diluted.

An archetypical example of Wonder Woman’s conformation to the Code is Kanigher’s rewriting of her origin story. Kanigher did not feel much loyalty to Marston’s original conception (or at times to his own various additions) and takes great liberties with the Wonder Woman universe. In light of Wertham’s accusations of Wonder Woman’s homosexuality, Wonder Woman’s new origin story explains the lack of men on Paradise Island to make her more heteronormative. In *Wonder Woman No. 105* (April 1959), “The Secret Origin of Wonder Woman,” Diana is not

⁷⁸ Kanigher et al., “Wonder Woman No. 99,” 59.

⁷⁹ Kanigher et al., “Wonder Woman No. 100,” 67.

⁸⁰ Zechowski, 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

sculpted by clay, but was born normally with an absent father. In the revamped story, Kanigher explains that Amazons were not always an all-female society, but forced to live that way when all the men die at war. "Woe is us," the Amazons sob. "We are alone now!" Grieving for their lost men, the Amazons escaped on a ship to Paradise Island.⁸²

The Code removed the kinky subtext that Marston so lovingly attached to the bondage and Wonder Woman's lasso. The elimination attests to the fact that the original Wonder Woman could have only been introduced during World War II and with Marston. The bondage was simply stamped out altogether. As one may recall, the Code "strictly" forbade "sex perversion or any interference to the same," so it makes sense that as soon as Wonder Woman started carrying the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval, the number of instances of bondage immediately nosedived. Tim Hanley does an extensive statistical analysis of the changes in Wonder Woman's content, including bondage. He found that the issue following *Wonder Woman No. 73* (April 1955), the first Wonder Woman comic book to be stamped with the seal of approval, was the last issue to feature more than ten percent bondage imagery. *Wonder Woman No. 78* (November 1955) was the last to feature more than five percent. By 1956, bondage was nonexistent.⁸³

Her lasso, however, survived censorship, but the manner in which she used it did not. No longer did she get tied up with her own lasso, capture her enemies or compel them to obey her commands. Instead, she used her lasso in new and inventive ways. She uses it as a propeller to redirect an airborne missile in *Wonder Woman No. 98* (May 1958).⁸⁴ In *Wonder Woman No. 99* (July 1958), Wonder Woman uses her lasso to fashion roller coaster tracks and divert lightning.⁸⁵ In *Wonder Woman No. 100* (August 1958), Wonder Woman saves Paradise Island from a tsunami wrapping her lasso around a mountain and lifting the entire island into the air.⁸⁶ If he had still been alive, Marston would have wondered where his lie-detecting lasso had gone.

⁸² Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 105," 198.

⁸³ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 145.

⁸⁴ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 98," 31.

⁸⁵ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 99," 59, 61.

⁸⁶ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 100," 89.

Hanley also examines the frequency of the appearance of Wonder Woman's wartime community of supportive female allies, discovering that although Wertham specifically targets the "homosexual" Holliday girls, Hanley points out that they had already disappeared from Kanigher's storylines by 1952, two years prior to the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, reappearing in 1960, but never regularly.⁸⁷ "The most likely explanation is that he just forgot about them for eight years," Hanley argues. He goes on to conclude, "We can definitely state that Wertham had no effect on the Holliday girls whatsoever, even though he mentioned them by name."⁸⁸ Wonder Woman's community of Amazon women on Paradise Island, however, still appear regularly in the comics, actually picking up in frequency after the Code was established in 1954, an unexpected outcome.⁸⁹ Even though they appear more frequently, the Amazons dramatically changed after the Code. Reform Island and all the kinky bondage traditions of Paradise Island, like Diana's Day, disappear. In typical Kanigher fashion (that is, struggling with continuity) sometimes the Amazons appear in their traditional Greek togas, but in other issues, they dress in contemporary fashions, like mod-style rompers.⁹⁰

Ironically, however, outside the pages of the comics, Kanigher was far more explicit about Wonder Woman's sexuality. While Marston was supportive of "female love relationships," and many innuendos appear in the pages of his stories, he did not explicitly call Wonder Woman a lesbian. Kanigher is the opposite of Marston. No innuendos appear in the postwar comics themselves; the Comics Code Authority would not permit that. However, off-page, Kanigher unambiguously stated to Trina Robbins in a 1996 phone interview, long after he had hung up his editor's hat, that he believed that Wonder Woman – and all the Amazons on Paradise Island – were, in fact, lesbians.^{91 92}

⁸⁷ Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, 142-3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 143-4.

⁹⁰ Kanigher et al., "Wonder Woman No. 103," 152.

⁹¹ Robbins, "Wonder Woman: Lesbian or Dyke? Paradise Island as a Woman's Community," 145.

⁹² The only allusion to Kanigher's hidden belief that made it past the censorship of the Comics Code Authority into postwar Wonder Woman is the increased frequency of Wonder Woman's catchphrase, "Suffering Sapphos!" The more the postwar stories became focused on the heterosexual romance between Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor, the more Wonder Woman said – to be more accurate, about three times

Caught up in the anxious atmosphere that dominated the 1950s, Wonder Woman was scrubbed clean of anything that might have homosexual undertones. The issue was that the elements of the Wonder Woman comics most associated with lesbianism – the Holliday girls and the Amazons – were also a big part of what made Wonder Woman comics deliver such an empowering message. In her universe, Wonder Woman was not an anomaly. She came from an island of strong girls whose power originates not wholly in natural talent, but in their pledge to serve love. The Holliday girls are just brave college girls who save the day. Female communities that were interpreted as solely ‘lesbian’ during the postwar period also represented ‘empowering’ and ‘supportive’ messages during the war, when the men were overseas and women rallied for the war effort. This difference of interpretation further explains her wartime popularity versus her postwar identity crisis.

“FORGET THE OLD...THE NEW WONDER WOMAN IS HERE!”

The climax of the changes Wonder Woman underwent in the 1950s did not culminate in their own decade. No, the ‘containment’ of Wonder Woman did not finally reach its peak until late into the 1960s, when Wonder Woman was actually no longer under Kanigher’s pen or editorial eye. In November 1968’s *Wonder Woman No. 178*, Wonder Woman’s design was revamped by new editor Jack Miller, writer Dennis O’Neill and artist Mike Sekowsky.⁹³ On the front cover, the new Wonder Woman paints an ‘X’ through her alter ego and her old, familiar star-spangled costume that had been with her since her 1941 debut. “Forget the old,” the cover proclaimed in groovy letters. “The New Wonder Woman is here!”⁹⁴ Diana Prince’s secretary disguise is crossed out as well; she would have no need for an alter ego, as this reimagining of Wonder Woman dresses in mod clothing, has no superpowers (instead practices ju-jitsu) and runs a fashion boutique. Marston was probably rolling over in his grave.⁹⁵

as much, from about 0.5 times per issue to 1.4 times per issue. See Hanley, *Wonder Woman Unbound: the Curious History of the World’s Most Famous Heroine*, 141.

⁹³ Kupperberg, 10.

⁹⁴ Dennis O’Neill and Mike Sekowsky, "Wonder Woman No. 178," (1968).

⁹⁵ Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body-Mythologies of Gender and Nation," 966.

The demise to this low point can be traced all the way back to Marston's death in 1947. The death of her unique creator, combined with the end of the war that had brought her into being, left Wonder Woman open to the conservatism of the postwar period – to both the primary message to women that they should return to the home and the vicious moral panic targeting comic books. These pressures rendered Wonder Woman into a shell of her former powerful, radical self – a pretty girl concerned with marriage (though she refused proposals), fighting foolish foes.

The deterioration of her once progressive and exciting narrative validates the contention of this thesis. If one looks at what happened to Wonder Woman after the war, after Marston, and sees how the popularity of Wonder Woman (and comics in general) plummeted, how women were pressured to return to their domestic sphere, how the Comics Code Authority affected her narrative, it becomes clear that her massive popularity during the war was peculiar, extraordinary and could have only happened under the specific conditions of World War II American society and through the influence of one man.

“Wonder Woman is to me — as she is to so many women of all ages — a symbol of all the glorious gifts that reside in the spirit of Woman. She is dashing and dazzling. Yet her true power and beauty come from within. The magic tools she brings to the fight — the bracelets, the lasso, the invisible plane — are only as good as her own ability, confidence, and courage to wield them. In that regard, perhaps she is not so different from you and me.”

– Lynda Carter, actress, pictured above as the superheroine in the *Wonder Woman* television series (1975 – 1979)

Epilogue

Wonder Woman on the Small and Big Screen

There is a reason that the popular Wonder Woman television series (1975 – 1979), starring former beauty queen Lynda Carter as the superheroine, set its first season in World War II rather than in the then-present-day 1970s. In short, her original incarnation – William Moulton Marston’s kinky, feisty, Nazi-fighting Amazon princess – was far more interesting and appealing to audiences in the comparatively more liberal atmosphere of the 1970s, rather than the powerless, domesticated version of Wonder Woman that she had become by the late 1960s. Until the show switched networks in 1977, this television version of Wonder Woman carried with her a strong feminist message, just like her paper predecessor.¹ “Any civilization that does not recognize the female is doomed to destruction,” Wonder Woman declares on the show. “Women are the wave of the future and sisterhood is...stronger than anything.”²

Wonder Woman’s popularity during the war helps us explain her rebirth thirty years later. Like World War II, the 1970s were another opportune moment in time when a powerful female comic book protagonist could become accepted and popular. American society during both the

¹ Once the show switched networks, the strong message of female empowerment was softened. Elana Levine says, “The setting was changed from the 1940s to the 1970s, and Wonder Woman became more overtly sexualized: she wore more revealing clothing, and stopped making the same explicit declarations about gender and power.” See Elana Levine, “Where have all the wonder women gone?,” *The Conversation*, Nov. 20 2014.

² As quoted in *ibid.*

1940s and the 1970s was marked by a liberal atmosphere in response to military conflict, though in the 1940s, the progressive attitude was in support of American participation in World War II, and in the 1970s, it was in opposition to American participation in the Vietnam War. Both decades were times of disturbance in the gendered status quo. While World War II was marked by women's entrance in the male-dominated workplace, the 1970s is marked by the emergence of second wave feminism. Inspired by the civil rights movement, second wave feminists campaigned for more rights for women, particularly in the workplace and in reproductive matters.³ In their fight for rights for women, it is not surprising that they chose, as an icon, the original female crusader for truth, justice and the American way – Wonder Woman.



PART I: SUPER GIRL TO COVER GIRL

The second wave feminists, adults during the 1970s, had been young girls during the 1940s. It is no chance happening that the girls, who had grown up reading Wonder Woman, or, at the very least, living in a society where a powerful woman like Wonder Woman was in the mainstream, were the ones who spearheaded the movement for women's rights. They used the image of Wonder Woman to lead the charge. The 1970s revival of World War II Wonder Woman highlights her significance. Even thirty years after her debut, she still stood out, and her message, however one may have interpreted it, was still able to resonated audiences. A princess with a lot of superpowers and a little bit of a bondage obsession was able to capture the nation's attention, and the reason she was able to do so (and remained in the mainstream even today) has a lot to do with *when* she entered the popular culture scene. Her entrance into popular culture was a phenomenon that could not have occurred at any other historical moment in history.

The story behind her popularity has led us through the social backdrop of the American wartime homefront – the realities of women entering the workplace during World war II, the ways

³ Martha Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism" (accessed March 10, 2015).

in which gender ideologies accommodated the phenomenon of women leaving the home without ever truly disappearing and the embodiment of these messages about women in female popular culture representations such as Rosie the Riveter and pin-up girls. World War II, which necessitated the movement of women into the male-dominated industries, did not disrupt ideas about traditional gender roles because it was framed by popular culture as a temporary change, just for women to do their part for the war effort. While Wonder Woman at first glance might have seemed out of place, she was just a superpowered (or extreme) version of Rosie the Riveter with the sexualized look of the pin-up girls.

The right time in the atmosphere of the war was only half of the story of her popularity. The other half of the equation of her popularity was that she had the right creator, William Moulton Marston. Marston led an unusual, scandalous life – from his multiple careers to his multiple women. While Wonder Woman was built from popular narratives from the wartime period, Marston endowed her with the “something extra” that made her stick to the popular imagination.

Yet once the war ended (and Marston died), Wonder Woman fell victim to the postwar revival of the domestic in popular culture. Women were expected to vacate wartime roles for the returning veterans, and this was reflected in *Wonder Woman* comics. Though her comics continued to be read, her popularity declined along with the status of women. The rebirth of her World War II persona, after a decade of this treatment, carries a strong message about female empowerment.

Leading second wave feminist Gloria Steinem in particular, fondly remembers reading Wonder Woman comics growing up. “As a little girl, Wonder Woman was the only female superhero, so she was irresistible,” she recalls. “She was literally the only game in town, the only hero that made you feel good about yourself.”⁴

When Steinem founded *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, she gave a nod to her childhood role model by giving Wonder Woman the front cover of the July 1972 issue.⁵ It was a tribute, but with an edge. “The depiction was not so much an overt celebration of Wonder Woman as it was a

⁴ As quoted in Wolff Scanlan.

⁵ Bob Duggan, “Wonder Woman: Feminist Icon, Feminist Failure, or Both?,” *Big Think* 2014.

critique of what she had devolved into,” explains Nikki Gloudeman of the Huffington Post. “After the war ended, and women went back into the home, Wonder Woman became defined less by strength...and more by domesticity and romance.”⁶ However, by reappropriating Wonder Woman for the feminist cause, second wave feminists returned Wonder Woman to both her roots and her former glory once more. “Who could resist a role model like that?” Joanne Edgar asked after extolling the amazing feats of Marston’s Wonder Woman inside that famous issue of *Ms. Magazine*.⁷

She may have been an irresistible role model, but she was not necessarily an ideal one for second wave feminism. When feminists reappropriated Wonder Woman, they glazed over the regressive characteristics that coexisted in Marston’s Wonder Woman and then enveloped her during the immediate postwar period. To ignore that there were two sides of Wonder Woman – both the progressive and the regressive – would be to ignore what made her popular. It was the combination of the two that allowed her to enter the mainstream as an empowered feminist role model to female readers and a stereotypically sexy warrior princess to male readers. Her contradictory narrative gave her widespread appeal.

PART II: COVER GIRL TO MOVIE STAR

Wonder Woman’s legacy is this double-edged appeal, which she has had since Marston created her in 1941, even though it may have waxed and waned through the decades (particularly the 1950s until she was revived in the 1970s). It has made her the most recognizable female superhero in history among male and female audiences, but it has also held her back, comparatively to her male peers. Like Batman and Superman, her comic book adventures have been published continuously since the 1940s, but unlike her male peers, whose appeal is much more straightforward, Wonder Woman has had significant problem transitioning to other popular culture mediums. Consider her blockbuster treatment: Batman and Superman, even Spiderman, have had all numerous reboots in recent years; even relatively insignificant characters like Ant-

⁶ Nikki Gloudeman, "More Than a Superhero: How Wonder Woman Helped Shape Feminism," *Huffington Post*, Sept. 29, 2014.

⁷ Joanne Edgar, "Wonder Woman: Revisited," *Ms. Magazine* July 1972.

Man will have their own superhero movies before Wonder Woman has her own.^{8 9} “Not since the '70s TV series with Lynda Carter has there been a single live-action Wonder Woman; the character's incarnations have been limited to the Justice League cartoons and to an animated, straight-to-DVD movie,” comments journalist Eileen Shim.¹⁰

The problem? As New York Times columnist Frank Bruni argues, it is her gender. “She’s in an industry where the overwhelming majority of decision makers and directors are men,” he writes. “Where the reliance on pre-existing source material — comic books, video games — means that a gender disparity simply perpetuates itself.” There is a misconception that superhero movies must be targeted only at men and that men would not want to watch a superhero movie with a female lead. Director of the wildly successful *Avengers* movie, Joss Whedon, tried to make a Wonder Woman movie, but the project was cancelled in 2007.¹¹ “There’s a glass ceiling cinematically.... They’ll say women don’t want to see action or men don’t want to see women,” he said in a 2012 interview with *Wired* magazine. “And I’m like, ‘Men don’t want to see women? Ninety percent of us really do!’”¹²

Now, Gal Gadot, an Israeli actress, has been cast as Wonder Woman in the upcoming *Batman v. Superman* movie, to be released in 2016.¹³ While it may not be her own film, *Variety* magazine reported that this supporting role is part of a three-movie deal that includes Gadot starring in a stand-alone Wonder Woman film.¹⁴

If our investigation of Wonder Woman’s popularity during World War II has taught us anything, it is that timing is not a coincidence. World War II and second wave feminism during the 1970s were two times at which the world was poised for the entrance (or resurgence) of Wonder

⁸ Jacki Zehner and Laura Moore, "A Report on the History of Wonder Woman and a Call to Action" (accessed March 21, 2015); Frank Bruni, "Waiting for Wonder Woman" *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 2013.

⁹ Ant-Man, starring Paul Rudd, is set to be released by Marvel summer 2015. See Wiluri Palavandishvili, "Predicting Marvel's Next 20 Movies Up Until 2022" (accessed March 21, 2015).

¹⁰ Eileen Shim, "Rejoice! A Wonder Woman Movie Is in the Works," *Mic* 2014.

¹¹ Sandy Schaefer, "Joss Whedon Discusses His Defunct 'Wonder Woman' Movie" (accessed March 21, 2015).

¹² As quoted in Angela Watercutter, "The Hunger Games' Katniss Everdeen: The Heroine the World Needs Right Now" *Wired* 2012.

¹³ Justin Kroll, "Wonder Woman' Gal Gadot Signs Three-Picture Deal with Warner Bros.," *Variety* 2014.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Woman in the mainstream. Now, with social media enabling women everywhere to talk about the issues they face and strong female protagonists showing up in top films like *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), the *Divergent* films (2014 – 2015) and *The Hunger Games* (2012 – 2014), we stand posed at another historical moment – that some have dubbed the fourth wave of feminism – when a female superhero could become popular.¹⁵

The world is ready. We will just have to wait and see whether or not Zack Snyder, director of *Batman v. Superman*, or Patty Jenkins, director of the unnamed upcoming Wonder Woman film, will be able to bring the same creative energy (though probably without the unusual philosophical theories) to cinematic Wonder Woman that William Moulton Marston brought to comic book Wonder Woman.

¹⁵ Kaitlin Ebersol, "How Fourth-Wave Feminism is Changing Disney's Princesses," *Highbrow* 2014.

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