

## Why Wonder Woman Matters

When I was a kid, being a hero seemed like the easiest thing in the world to be- A Blue Beetle quote from the DC Comics publication The OMAC Project.

### Introduction

The superhero is one of modern American culture's most popular and pervasive myths. Though the primary medium, the comic book, is often derided as juvenile or material fit for illiterates the superhero narrative maintains a persistent presence in popular culture through films, television, posters and other mediums. There is a great power in the myth of the superhero.

The question "Why does Wonder Woman matter?" could be answered simply. Wonder Woman matters because she is a member of this pantheon of modern American gods. Wonder Woman, along with her cohorts Batman and Superman represent societal ideals and provide colorful reminders of how powerful these ideals can be.<sup>1</sup> This answer is compelling, but it ignores Wonder Woman's often turbulent publication history. In contrast with titles starring Batman or Superman, Wonder Woman comic books have often sold poorly. Further, Wonder Woman does not have quite the presence that Batman and Superman both share in popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Any other character under similar circumstances—poor sales, lack of direction and near constant revisions—would have been killed off or quietly faded into the background. Yet, Wonder Woman continues to persist as an important figure both within her comic universe and in our popular consciousness.

"Why does Wonder Woman matter?" To answer this question an understanding of the superhero and their primary medium, the comic book, is required, Wonder Woman is a comic book character, and her existence in the popular consciousness largely depends on how she is presented within the conventions of the comic book superhero narrative. First, I will discuss the

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<sup>1</sup> Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Paige Averett, "The Search for Wonder Woman: An Autoethnography of Feminist Identity" *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work* 24 (2009)

latest revision to the character and how it provided the catalyst to dealing with the question of Wonder Woman's importance. Then I will provide a history of Wonder Woman with a particular emphasis on her origin, the presentation of her character, and how that presentation converges or diverges from the mythic ideal Wonder Woman. Following that will be an explanation of the superhero narrative and how the Wonder Woman narrative conforms to and contradicts the foundational conventions of the genre. In this context I will analyze Wonder Woman in relation to her male counterparts Batman and Superman—determining the source of her importance both within their shared comic universe and in our popular consciousness.

### **The Problem**

Wonder Woman is one of the most popular superheroes and certainly the most popular and widely known superheroines. She is one of the very few independent superheroine characters. Most other superheroines are derivatives of a male hero, Batgirl, Supergirl, the inelegantly named She-Hulk, or they exist only within the context of a superhero team. Wonder Woman is not only the foremost superheroine, but is also a member of the DC Universe's "Big Three". Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman are the only superhero comic book characters to be published continually since the first appearance of superheroes over seventy-five years ago. These three superheroes are the premiere characters in the DC universe. They have a hand in nearly every event that occurs within their universe, and big company-wide crossovers<sup>3</sup> begin and end with these three. Despite Wonder Woman's prominence, her character is highly mutable whereas Batman and Superman's characteristics and appearance tend toward immutability. The

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<sup>3</sup> A crossover is a comic book "event" when characters from all over the comic book universe will appear under the same title. Typically they are released to attract new readers and drive up sales.

revision of Wonder Woman's character and costume in 2010 highlights both the trend of mutability and also some of the more difficult aspects of presenting Wonder Woman.

In the summer of 2010 comic book writer J. Michael Straczynski and renowned comic book artist, Jim Lee set out to redesign Wonder Woman's costume and character in an attempt to revitalize the character and attract new readers. Gone was the iconic and often derided patriotic one piece that Wonder Woman had worn, with a few tweaks and exceptions, for over seventy-five years. In its place is a design that Jim Lee describes as

A design worthy of the mantle of Wonder Woman, but one that didn't scream classic superhero! So we played down and scaled back the iconic elements... Visually the character seems edgier than before but stylish enough to warrant a second albeit cautious glance. The jacket and boots confirm the costumes functionality and the open, thinner tiara and shaped bracelets reveal a lighter, even youthful bent to the Amazon Princess.<sup>4</sup>

The changes were instigated by lagging sales and a seeming disinterest in the character. JMS<sup>5</sup> explains the situation in an interview with Newsarama

Wonder Woman is a terrific character, strong and bright and compelling and she should be selling the top twenty on a regular basis. But for the last few years, despite some really good storytelling, she's selling in the low 70's: the numbers have been in free-fall. Starting from May 2009 to the present, the book has lost 500-1000 readers per month. Over the last two years it has lost one-third of its readership.<sup>6</sup>

There is not much unusual about the process of change described here. It is well accepted in comic book culture that when a title is selling fewer copies a change needs to occur, usually involving the introduction of a new creative team. Typically, the changes implemented are superficial and temporary. But in Wonder Woman's case the changes reach much further even expanding into her origin story, the sacrosanct element of any comic book character.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> "Jim Lee on Wonder Woman's New Costume" <http://www.dccomics.com/blog/2010/06/30/jim-lee-on-wonder-woman%25e2%2580%2599s-new-costume>

<sup>5</sup> J. Michael Straczynski's nickname.

<sup>6</sup> "JMS Talks Wonder Woman's New Look and New Direction" <http://newsarama.com/comic/jms-talks-wonder-woman-1000629.html> All Straczynski quotes taken from this interview.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1992), 48.

changes undertaken by JMS and Jim Lee are not just a reboot<sup>8</sup>, but a complete overhaul of the Wonder Woman character. JMS claims that the changes will revitalize the character: to help her “come across as: strong, sexy, dynamic, powerful” in opposition to the “kind of mother or cute girl next door” that he believes the character has ossified into.

The extent of JMS’s changes is bewildering. At the time I was not a particular fan of Wonder Woman, but as a life-long comic book fan I had an understanding that these kinds of drastic revisions did not occur to characters of Wonder Woman’s stature. A major character could be killed off, but nothing essential to the character would be changed. JMS’s changes were especially troubling given DC Comic’s recent treatment of two other major characters, the Green Lantern and the Flash. Both characters have recently undergone major changes. In contrast to Wonder Woman’s situation, these changes were implemented to return the characters to their “classic” iterations, their old costumes, alter-egos, and origins.<sup>9</sup> My first inclination was to chalk up the difference in treatments to the fact that Wonder Woman is a woman, a gender often marginalized in the superhero narrative. This seemed sound especially given JMS’s quote about Wonder Woman’s ossification in to a “mother” or “girl next door figure”, however after further reflection and study it dawned on me that there is more to the situation than that. Another quote from the JMS interviews highlights this point. “Wonder Woman has, to an extent, become like a Ferrari you keep in the garage 24/7 because you’re afraid of denting it. It’s great to look at, beautiful in line and form, and as long as it’s in the garage, it’s safe”. Certainly the Ferrari is safe in the garage, but so is the driver. That is the appeal and the difficulty of Wonder Woman. She is an icon and a dangerous character.

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<sup>8</sup> The reboot is the term for updating a character to fit the times. Elements of the story are updated to remove anachronisms, but the essentials of the character and their origin are kept intact. One of the better executed reboots in recent memory is the Christopher Nolan film “Batman Begins”.

<sup>9</sup> Multiple characters have taken up the mantle of the Flash, and the Green Lantern. Recently the more modern characters were replaced by the versions first introduced in the 1950’s

Throughout her publication history editors, writers, artists, and even popular feminists have contemplated what to do with Wonder Woman. She is a great character, foundational to the genre, but creators have a difficult time working with her. This certainly occurs in part because she is a woman in a male dominated medium. In contrast, however, to her female counterparts<sup>10</sup> Wonder Woman has grown in popularity and continues to be a compelling and resonant character. Comic book creators have a difficult time with Wonder Woman because in her origin and character she defies superhero comic book conventions.

### **An Unconventional History of Wonder Woman**

Comic book histories generally fall into two broad categories. Either they are histories of production aspects—creators, editors, writers, artists and the development of different publishing groups, or they are uncritical encyclopedias devoted to laying out the history of a character within their universe. For the purposes of this paper these categories are cumbersome and unproductive. Instead I will present a history built on “irreversible premises”.<sup>11</sup> A history based on irreversible premises will allow us to interact and incorporate production aspects and character’s storylines without getting bogged down in minute and tiresome details.

Irreversible premises are the elements of a superhero narrative that work to preserve the superhero’s mythic timelessness. Characters still have the capacity to change, but these changes usually occur over a very long period of time. From month to month and year to year superheroes remain relatively static. Irreversible premises typify the ideal form of a character. They are highly related to the origin of the character and set forth the elements that will set the hero apart from other characters. Examining Wonder Woman’s publication history through the

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<sup>10</sup> The most common fates for superheroines in comic books are to die, be depowered, or marginalized. See “Women in Refrigerators” <http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/> for more on this phenomenon.

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton “The Myth of Superman: The Amazing Adventures of Superman Review” *Diacritics* 2 (1972)

lens of irreversible premises will provide a clear picture of when and how the mythic, ideal Wonder Woman and the actual, printed Wonder Woman converge and diverge. The relationship between the ideal and the actual presentation of Wonder Woman through the years is key to understanding her importance.

Wonder Woman owes her existence to an eccentric Harvard trained psychologist and inventor of the lie detecting polygraph, William Moulton Marston. Marston firmly believed that women should be the dominant force in society. In Marston's world-view the anti-social, violent tendencies of mankind were uniquely male, and these tendencies could be overcome with the loving, maternal traits unique to women. Despite his tendency to essentialize men and women Marston was a pioneer who recognized that "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength and power." Marston rattled his brain coming up with ideas to correct this problem. None would stick until Wonder Woman.

The original superhero, Superman, first appeared on in Action Comics #1 in June 1938. Superman soon had numerous copycats and competitors on the scene, each trying to cash in on the superhero craze. Marston took advantage of the quickly rising popularity of superhero comics and set out to create a character "with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman." Marston intended for Wonder Woman to serve as a model of a new kind of woman, still imbued with all the "loving, tender, maternal and feminine" characteristics he believed essential to all women, but who possessed the strength and power to back up her compassion.<sup>12</sup>

This is Wonder Woman's defining characteristic. Unlike Batman and Superman, characters with simple, visceral origin stories created to connect with reader's fantasies of power

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<sup>12</sup> All Marston quotes from Les Daniels, *Wonder Woman : The Complete History, the Life and Times of the Amazon Princess* (San Francisco : Chronicle Books, 2004)

and adventure, Wonder Woman was meant to be more than simply a fun and attractive crime-fighter. Wonder Woman from the outset was intended to be an icon.

Wonder Woman's original origin story springs from Marston's fertile imagination and love of Greek and Roman myths. The first Wonder Woman story explains that the Amazons were created by Aphrodite to be a force for peace and justice set against Ares and his forces of male aggression and war. Hercules, maddened by Ares, hears of the Amazons and their prowess in battle; deciding that no woman could defeat him he sets out to conquer the Amazonian women. Queen Hippolyta, aided by her Magic Girdle, a gift from Aphrodite, best Hercules in single combat. After his defeat Hercules uses his skills in chicanery and seduction to steal the Magic Girdle from Queen Hippolyta. Without Aphrodite's gift the Amazons are quickly subdued and bound in chains. After a period of slavery the Queen prays to Aphrodite to restore her favor to the Amazons. Hippolyta is able to recover her Magic Girdle and the Amazons are able to best their captors. The conditions of Aphrodite's renewed favor are that the Amazons must leave Paradise Island and that they must always wear the bracelets that were chains as a reminder to remain isolated from men.

This dizzying backstory serves as the introduction for Wonder Woman, also known as Princess Diana. Diana is created from clay by her mother, Queen Hippolyta, and animated to life by Aphrodite's power. The Amazons' idyllic life on Paradise Island is disrupted when Colonel Steve Trevor, a United States Army Intelligence officer, crash lands near Paradise Island. Aphrodite declares to Queen Hippolyta that she must hold a test to find the strongest and wisest Amazon to return Steve Trevor to America and to aid the United States, the "last citadel of democracy and equal rights for women". Diana, forbidden to enter the contest, dons a disguise

and enters anyway, winning spectacularly—much to her mother’s dismay. Despite her mother’s misgivings she is presented with the Wonder Woman costume and sets off for America with Steve Trevor, who will become her main romantic interest. Once in America, she dons the alter-ego of Diana Prince, and works first as a nurse, then an intelligence officer to stay close to Steve Trevor.

The original Wonder Woman costume consisted of a red top adorned with a golden eagle across the bosom, blue bottoms with white stars and red boots. The bracelets on her wrist served as both armor and weakness. Wonder Woman could deflect bullets and other projectiles with the bracelets, but if they were linked together with chains she would lose her great strength. The magic lasso was a later addition that compelled truth and obedience from anyone who was bound with it. The lasso also provided another weakness for Wonder Woman: it was the only bond she could not break free from. Along with the bracelets and lasso Wonder Woman is as “lovely as Aphrodite, as wise as Athena—with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules.”<sup>13</sup>

Along with advancing his ideas about women’s and men’s roles Marston also detested the grotesque violence of other comic books, and believed that exciting stories could be told without graphic violence. As a result Wonder Woman was more apt to make a friend out of an enemy than to simply fight them. As Dietrich observes astutely “Wonder Woman does not shoot bullets or heat rays; she deflects them. She does not beat the truth out of her captives; she ties them up and lets the properties of her magic lasso mesmerize the truth from them”.<sup>14</sup>

Conciliation is one of Wonder Woman’s most powerful and under-appreciated superpowers.

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<sup>13</sup> Origin story, costume, and quotes from All Star Comics no. 8 Dec-Jan’41

<sup>14</sup> Bryan D., Dietrich “Queen of Pentacles: Archotyping Wonder Woman.” *Extrapolation* 47 (2006) , 231



Another area where Wonder Woman adventures differed from many of the other superheroes of the Golden Age<sup>15</sup> was the emphasis on relationships. Wonder Woman's comic book adventures featured many positive portrayals of female friendship. The local Holliday College women, led by the comic relief character Etta Candy, often attend Wonder Woman on her adventures. Interestingly, while she spent a good deal of time developing new friendships, her romance with Steve Trevor remained stuck in neutral. The relational aspect of Wonder Woman highlights the fact that ideally, this is a character that solves problems less through violence, and more with care and understanding. This aspect of the character is the best example of Marston's careful portrayal of his views. Wonder Woman in these early stories had the strength to tear down injustice violently, but instead chose to build relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Wonder Woman's origin, far more complex than the origins of her male counterparts, provides a clear picture of her irreversible premises. She is the only child of a race of women dedicated to the perpetuation of peace and justice. After proving her great skill, she is rewarded with the title and uniform of Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman travels to "Man's World" to be a champion and ambassador for the Amazons and their message of peace. Wonder Woman is mightier than any other man or woman, but chooses to resolve conflicts peacefully when possible. Wonder Woman, under the pen of Marston, served as an example to men and women of what a woman, fully actualized, could be.

From her first appearance in 1941 to the early 1950's these irreversible premises were well in place. Authored by her creator Marston and brought to life on the page by the superbly skilled H. G. Peter, Wonder Woman comics sold extremely well and the character attained a

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<sup>15</sup> The term used to describe the period between Superman's first appearance in 1939 and the end of World War II when comic books enjoyed their greatest popularity.

<sup>16</sup> Marc DiPaolo, "Wonder Woman as World War II Veteran, Feminist Icon, and Sex Symbol" In *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010) 70-91

measure of popularity only equaled by Superman and Batman during the war years. Wonder Woman strong, capable, and undeniably feminine struck a chord with readers. As women began to take on traditionally masculine roles during World War II Wonder Woman led the way and served as an example of what women were capable of.

These good times could not last though. The 1950's brought a number of disappointments for the character. With the end of World War II it seemed that superheroes had run out of worthy foes to battle. Sales of their comics plummeted. Crime, horror, westerns and romance comics became more popular as superheroes were dropped or quietly worked out of their own books. Soon only the Big Three—Wonder Woman, Batman and Superman were left. Add to this desolate landscape Frederic Wertham's scathing criticism of comic books, "Seduction of the Innocent", the resulting Comic Code Authority that severely limited what comic books could discuss and present, and it seemed that comic books, especially superhero stories were on the way out. Wonder Woman managed to continue, albeit with a few major changes. Wertham's homoerotic reading of Wonder Woman suggested that her friendship with the Holliday College Girls, her crime-fighting allies, was a firm advertisement for lesbianism. As a result the Holliday College Girls were largely written out of the stories, and Wonder Women spent much less time with girl-friends and much more time fighting science-fiction monstrosities or contemplating her romance with Steve Trevor.

William Moulton Marston's death in 1947 and H.G. Peter's dismissal in the early 1950's, accounted for a large part of Wonder Woman's loss of identity. The end of World War II and the rise of McCarthyism also played a large role in Wonder Woman's domestication. The re-establishment of "traditional" masculine and feminine roles in society, and the rising notion that

“it was not possible to be both a progressive and a patriot”<sup>17</sup> meant that Wonder Woman, presented as the model of a new womanhood, had few advocates. The Wonder Woman stories of this era focused primarily on her romantic endeavors and near constant marriage proposals from such secondary characters as Steve Trevor, Mer-man, and Bird-man. The other stories of this era were largely asinine comic book adventures that presented Wonder Woman as a typical superpowered hero, punch first, and ask questions later. Wonder Woman still maintained her superpowers, but without her initial creative team she was forced to become less of an icon for young girls, and more a guardian of women’s socially dictated role in the 1950’s.

The 1950’s were not a total setback for superheroes. DC comic’s reimagining and reconstruction of popular Golden Age heroes such as the Flash, the Green Lantern, and Hawkman sparked what is termed by comic book historians as the Silver Age of Comic Books. Superheroes once again found their popularity on the upswing, not to the levels of their World War II heyday, but more than enough to get publishing companies interested in printing superhero stories. Through the rest of this decade and most of the 1960’s the domesticated Wonder Woman maintained her place in the DC universe as the premiere superheroine, she was a founding member of the Justice League of America and continued to be the only widely recognizable superheroine. Nevertheless, sales of the Wonder Woman comic and the stories inside remained mired in mediocrity. Wonder Woman was an iconic character divorced from her animating spark, and with her irreversible premises lost or ignored writers simply did not seem to know how to handle the character.

The late 1960’s brought a new direction and the first major revision to the Wonder Woman character. The changes inflicted so much editorial violence onto the character that the pretender on the first issues of the new “Diana Prince, Wonder Woman” resembled the Amazon

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 79

Princess in name only. In an effort to increase sales Carmine Infantino, DC's head editor, assigned Dennis O'Neil to completely overhaul the Wonder Woman title. The result was a creative direction that saw Wonder Woman do away with her powers, replace her costume with trendy modern fashions, and abandon her title of Wonder Woman. Dennis O'Neil had great success with his revision of Batman by returning the character to his roots as a dark detective, and his work on the Green Lantern/Green Arrow demonstrated both how to write relevant social justice stories and how to defy the Comic Code Authority. However, when it came to the character of Wonder Woman who encompassed all of those elements O'Neil's magic had failed to reach the truth of the character.

In the revamped storyline the Amazons must leave earth, but Wonder Woman chooses to stay because of her love for Steve Trevor.<sup>18</sup> As a result of her decision Wonder Woman loses her powers and must now face life as Diana Prince, boutique store owner. Apparently along with losing her powers she also loses any memory of her Amazonian combat training as well. She acquires a martial arts instructor, I-Ching, who becomes her primary partner as they go on whirlwind adventures that more closely resembled the TV series, the Avengers, than anything that Marston would have concocted.

The one redeeming factor for the ill-fated changes was that it attempted to deal with feminism and women's issues. O'Neil believed that the portrayal of Diana as a "normal" woman facing considerable challenges was "in keeping with the feminist agenda."<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, practice was not as effective as purpose. The stories did not appeal to many readers and the title character, almost totally divorced from her irreversible premises—did not resonate as Wonder Woman especially to feminists like Gloria Steinem. Steinem, a fan of Wonder Woman's 1940's

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<sup>18</sup> Steve Trevor dies shortly after the new storyline begins. This trend of his death and resurrection continued well into the 1980's and depended largely on who was writing the stories.

<sup>19</sup> Daniels, *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, 126

iteration, shared the experience of many Wonder Woman fans of being saved by the character,<sup>20</sup> and in turn Steinem saved Wonder Woman from irrelevance. In response to the O'Neil instigated changes Steinem featured Wonder Woman on the first cover of Ms. Magazine in her original uniform and ran articles critiquing the current run. Steinem also compiled and published a collection of Marston era stories that featured her introduction that stated the importance of Wonder Woman as she appeared in 1940's. Due to these pressures and to continued poor sales the "new" Wonder Woman was trashed and the character returned to her original iteration, at least in appearance, in 1973. Thanks to Steinem's fond memories of the Wonder Woman of her childhood, the ideal mythic Wonder Woman and the actual comic book character were again in sync, if only for a short time.

The victory was monumental and short-lived. Wonder Woman's popularity skyrocketed with the creation of a 1976 television series. This program starring Lynda Carter—presented Wonder Woman as the icon that the feminist movement had appropriated. At the same time the gulf between the ideal Wonder Woman created in 1940 that had inspired Steinem and numerous other feminists as young women, and the actual character appearing in comic books during the 1970's and early 1980's was widening. The only constant in these stories was Wonder Woman's uniform. Even with friends in high places Wonder Woman could not escape poor sales and a dwindling audience. Wonder Woman's appropriation by the feminist movement during the 1970's was a blessing and a curse. In a very meaningful way the ideal Wonder Woman, the role model that Marston had envisioned, would continue to exist in the popular consciousness. But it also meant that from now on whatever creative team took on the Wonder Woman character could not ignore the politically progressive ideas inherent to Wonder Woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Gloria Steinem, introduction to *Wonder Woman*, by William Moulton Marston and H.G. Peter (New York: Warner Books, 1972)

During the rest of the 70's and the early 80's Wonder Woman comics continued to struggle with sales and like the other superheroes in the DC universe, with the convoluted continuity that resulted from nearly 50 years of serialized stories. The solution was to implement a company-wide comic crossover that would do away with the multiple earths that had cropped up in part as explanations for why heroes like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman could have appeared during World War II and still be active in 1985.<sup>21</sup> The resulting storyline Crisis on Infinite Earths brought together all the DC superheroes in one story for the first time, consolidated the multiverse into one universe, did away with unpopular characters, and opened the door for new iterations of classic characters and new stories.

As a result of the Crisis, Wonder Woman literally ceased to exist. The final panels featuring the character in the story show her transforming back into the clay that she was molded from. The stage was set for the character to return to her roots. In 1986 Wonder Woman returned revamped for a new generation by the acclaimed writer/artist responsible for Crisis on Infinite Earths, George Perez.

The beauty of a well done reboot is that it re-emphasizes what is essential to the character while updating the setting and removing some of the troublesome storytelling aspects of the original. The Perez reboot did away with the conglomeration of Greek and Roman myth that Marston had used in his origin. Instead Perez placed the origin distinctly in the tradition of the Greek myths; the Greek pantheon took a much more active role in the stories. Wonder Woman still battled with Ares, but the division between men's and women's essential traits, a key element of Marston's philosophy, was dropped. Perez did away with the permanently stalled

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<sup>21</sup> The multi-verse was DC's answer for why superheroes could first appear around World War II and still be presented as relatively young people in the 70's and 80's. The heroes who fought in World War II existed on a different earth, Earth-2, while the heroes appearing in the monthly titles existed on Earth-1. The multi-verse was also used to explain away unpopular character changes and storylines.

romance with Steve Trevor. The new Wonder Woman travels to Man's World out of a sense of duty to the gods and a devotion to the ideals of peace and justice, rather than a rash romance. The character that arose from these changes hit a pitch perfect note. Wonder Woman was again more than just a superheroine decked out in a gaudily colored costume. Perez's emphasis on Greek mythology, Wonder Woman's mission as an ambassador of the Amazons, and her relationships with friends resulted in a Wonder Woman that hearkened back to her 1940's heyday, did away with the domestication that had occurred from the 50's onward and reestablished Wonder Woman as an icon and an exciting character. Like the 1940's Wonder Woman created by Marston, Perez's Wonder Woman was not a crime fighter, but an ambassador for peace and justice. Battles with villains were still part of the storylines, but Wonder Woman's adversaries were more likely to be social ills or characters from mythology, than common hoods or supervillains.

The comics produced during Perez's 4 year authorship achieved great critical and commercial success, but no comic book run can last forever. With Perez at the helm, Wonder Woman experienced a renaissance that brought the character closer to her original and most resonant form than she had been in decades. However, Perez's penchant for crafting stories dealing with Wonder Woman's relationships with her friends and social justices issues left those clamoring for more blood and guts action unsatisfied.

Once Perez left in 1992, DC comics assigned the creative team of writer William Messner-Loebs and Mike Deodato Jr. to the title. Under their direction the stories and Wonder Woman's characters did a one hundred-eighty degree turn from the Perez years. During the 1990's superhero comics, in an attempt to become more "adult", began featuring increasingly graphic violence and sexual content. Superheroes started to become more flawed, often to the

point that it became difficult to discern which characters were the heroes and who were the villains. Wonder Woman did not escape this fate. Messner-Loebs and Deodato Jr.'s Wonder Woman was conceived as a violent warrior, rushing into battle after battle in impossibly sexual poses, often against other equally hyper-sexualized female opponents. Wonder Woman was still nominally an ambassador for peace and justice, but now she was more than willing to bloody her hands to get the point across.

This trend to an increasingly shrill and violent proponent of peace, justice and equality continued through the 1990's. Notable, critically acclaimed works such as Kingdom Come, The OMAC Project, and New Frontier greatly increased Wonder Woman's prominence within the DC universe<sup>22</sup>, but at the same time these works presented the character as an increasingly unreasonable ideologue, so bent on spreading her Amazonian message that she was unable to relate to "normal" humans or her superhero compatriots. The kick-ass Amazonian warrior was in and the progressive humanist (who would much rather talk than fight) was out.

Starting in 2000 Wonder Woman has had a much more diverse group of writers handle her comic book adventures. The comic book still suffered from poor sales, but the writing brought the character back to her center. The mythic ideal and the comic book character converged once more. Gail Simone's run beginning in 2007 brought the comic book character closer to this ideal than even Marston's original conception. The Wonder Woman presented in Simone's stories was "strong, sexy, dynamic, powerful", but none of these elements were overdone. Simone's Wonder Woman is a truly caring individual who with very rare exceptions ends a battle through compassion than concussion. Despite some of the best storytelling the title

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<sup>22</sup> Following the Crisis on Infinite Earths the timeline was altered so that Wonder Woman appears after the establishment of the Justice League of America, rather than being a founding member. As a result her significance in the DC comic universe was dimmed somewhat



has ever had sales continued to remain poor, leading to J. Michael Straczynski taking over the title and the changes discussed earlier in this essay.

Wonder Woman is a complex and difficult character to handle. The near constant change experienced by the character over her seventy-five plus years of publication speaks to this. Yet, despite these changes, poor sales, and mediocre writing, the character maintains a prominent place in the popular consciousness. The near constant changes indicate that those responsible for the Wonder Woman narrative are searching for a way to deal with a character that has achieved status as an icon, but remains a living entity within the DC Universe. The changes attempt to answer what to do with a mythic character that has become myth herself, and who in many ways subverts the tropes of the superhero genre.

### **The Superhero Myth: Wonder Woman and the Big Three**

Approaching the question “Why does Wonder Woman matter?” by analyzing the history of the character leaves important clues to the answer, Marston’s vision for the character and her appropriation as an icon of feminism being the most prominent. But there is more to the question than that. The other piece of this puzzle is the place that the superhero myth has in popular culture and Wonder Woman’s place within that pantheon.

Superheroes, especially the “classic” superheroes are archetypal, emotionally visceral figures, projections of our fantasies and ideals out onto the world. Wonder Woman is no exception to this, but she is an exception to many of the tropes and conventions of the superhero genre. Wonder Woman does not fit neatly with these conventions the way that Superman or Batman do. This is the key to understanding her place and importance in the modern American pantheon of superheroes.

During this discussion of the superhero narrative and Wonder Woman's complicated place within it I will use the other two members of the Big Three, Batman and Superman as a normative counterpoint to the unconventional Wonder Woman narrative. The origins of Batman and Superman are both widely known in their general form; however it is useful to outline them here to fill in important details.

Superman was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster in 1938. As an infant he was placed into a rocket by his parents to escape the destruction of his home planet, Krypton. The rocket lands on Earth, and is discovered by a human couple, Jonathon and Martha Kent. The couple names the baby Clark and raises him as their own. In his adolescence he discovers his unique abilities and his true heritage as a Kryptonian. As an adult, mild-mannered Clark Kent works as reporter for the Daily Planet in Metropolis and fights for truth, justice, and the American Way as Superman.

Created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939, Batman is born when as a young Bruce Wayne witnesses his parent's murder. Vowing vengeance against criminals Bruce Wayne travels the world and trains himself to be a formidable combatant, detective, and strategist. One evening, after Bruce Wayne has returned to Gotham City a bat crashes through the window of Wayne Mansion. The bat frightens Wayne and he decides to take the bat as his symbol reasoning that criminals are a cowardly and superstitious lot. Batman uses his considerable wealth to augment his physical and intellectual prowess in his never-ending war on crime

The superhero narrative is a mythical narrative. It relies on certain storytelling mechanisms and conventions to maintain this mythic quality. These conventions arise from elements present in the very first superhero story. In his work *Superheroes: A Modern*

*Mythology*, Richard Reynolds presents a list of seven defining traits of the superhero genre. They are as follows:

1. The hero is marked out from society. They often reach maturity without having a relationship with their parents
2. At least some of the superheroes will be earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even their devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of the surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of their alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.<sup>23</sup>

These principles derive from Reynolds' reading of Superman's first appearance in Action

Comics #1. The principles can be applied to almost every superhero imaginable. The

combination of these elements in a story informs the reader that they are engaging a superhero narrative. The Wonder Woman narrative complies with these seven traits with a few exceptions, most notably point number one.

Point number one on Reynold's list emphasizes that the superhero narrative is ultimately an adolescent one. It represents the often heard yearnings of children that they wish they could have a different family, or for their family to just disappear. Superman, the last son of Krypton, who is raised by the Kents in Kansas, and Batman, the vengeful orphan, are powerful purveyors of this adolescent fantasy. In contrast Wonder Woman grows up normally<sup>24</sup> and develops and maintains a healthy relationship with her mother. Her origin story was complex and complete from her first appearance. The origins of her two counterparts were quite sparse and have only developed greater detail as their stories were published through the years. Batman and Superman compelling as they are; are adolescent characters. Wonder Woman from her inception is an adult character.

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<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 16

<sup>24</sup> As normally as you can in a comic book.

Another facet of the superhero narrative worth exploring is that superhero characters are typically champions of the norm. The normal and everyday are worthy of exaltation and protection. The structure of the typical superhero story features a disruption in the norm, usually caused by a villain. The hero responds to the challenge. There are obstacles to be overcome and battles to be fought, but in the end the hero is victorious and the norm, the “status quo” has been restored.<sup>25</sup> Even destructive, borderline psychotic characters, such as Marvel’s Incredible Hulk or Wolverine act in such a way as to preserve the status quo. Batman and Superman epitomize the concept of superheroes as defenders of the norm. Batman fights a never-ending battle against crime to prevent a disruption of the status quo that he has already experienced. No child should lose their parents at such a young age. Superman has often been the source of mockery in comic book circles for his dedication to “outdated” values.

In contrast, everything about the character of Wonder Woman demands change. The character was created to be a role model for a new kind of womanhood. She first appeared in a turbulent time advocating changes in the way men and women interacted with each other. Alone among superhero characters Wonder Woman is an adult character that emphasizes relationships, realizes that some problems cannot be solved with violence, and recognizes that sometimes the status quo is unjust.

## **Conclusion**

This is a love story, a story that started seventeen years ago when a young boy discovered the colorful world of the superhero. The adventures were exciting and the characters possessed great strength, power, and morality. The superheroes always made the right decision always had

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 77

enough willpower and determination to defend their values (and thus society's values) no matter what. To a young boy the superhero narrative proved to be a powerful and intoxicating elixir.

Of course, I am not the only person to be affected by the superhero myth. The narrative is still alive and well in our culture. The superhero is both a representation for our ideals and a myth that we can project ourselves into. The superheroes are a modern American pantheon of gods that are not only representative of our ideals and aspirations, but vehicles for our imaginations to actively take part in the myth and create our own narratives. For these reasons heroes like Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman still pervade the popular consciousness.

The superhero narrative that emphasizes protection of the norm is a great comfort in a world often fraught with change. Batman and Superman are archetypal characters—large brush strokes rather than detailed characters—who are monthly called upon to uphold the norm. It is easy to see how they maintain their place in the pantheon and why they continue to be a dominant presence in popular culture. They are characters that allow the reader to take comfort in their tremendous strength and power, and for a small period of time the reader can imagine that they too possess these qualities. Wonder Woman has persisted as a powerful icon despite her continued resistance to this model.

Wonder Woman has always been truest to her mythic ideal when she is written in opposition to the superhero narrative. Attempts to domesticate the character and conform her to the typical superhero narrative have failed and only served to highlight how difficult it is for writers to take the “Ferrari” out for a spin. Wonder Woman is a dangerous character. She is dangerous because she is not a placating character. Unlike her counterparts, Batman and Superman, the adolescent, archetypal characters that uphold the norm and thus provide comforting escapes and solutions to problems in the real world; Wonder Woman is a

transgressive character that challenges the norm. Wonder Woman occupies a unique and unsettling place in the modern American pantheon where our ideals are personified into characters with abilities far greater than our own. In this pantheon Wonder Woman is the character that urges us into self-examination and action. She is the mythic figure that recognizes that sometimes the status quo is unjust, that compassion is a better choice than aggression, and who encourages us to think about the world and our relationship to other people in it. Wonder Woman matters because as her creator William Moulton Marston intended she gives strength and power to uncomfortable ideas. Change is unsettling, but to make world a better place change is necessary. Wonder Woman matters because as a mythic figure she is a constant reminder that we cannot escape from the problems that plague us, but we can and should work to fix them.

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