

WONDER WOMAN

THE
FEMALE
BODY AND
POPULAR
CULTURE



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Wonder Woman

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Wonder Woman
*The Female Body and
Popular Culture*

Joan Ormrod

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*For all the Wonder Women in my life, principally
my mother who is a fantastic role model*

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Series Editors' Foreword

Body image, as many books in this library show, is central to the discussion of gender and sexuality. In recent years, this debate has often centred around the supposed binaries of brains or beauty for women, implicitly rejecting the idea that the two things are not mutually exclusive.

Wonder Woman is a character who has been around since she first appeared in comics in 1941, in a world troubled by its second globalized war in a generation. She was represented in a well-known TV series in the 1970s and, most recently, in a film by Patty Jenkins in 2017. She was even announced as an Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations in the area of girls' empowerment in 2016, to the derision of many feminists who argued that her original message of female empowerment in a world of masculine warfare had been lost in the sexualization of the white female body of popular culture. The UN bowed to the weight of argument and retracted its decision. However, as Ormrod shows in this book, the character of Wonder Woman is not the one-dimensional, beautiful, white, sexualized woman of popular image, but is in fact multidimensional. In a series of arguments based around representations of Wonder Woman, Ormrod suggests that the female action hero can in fact be many things without excluding what is white and what is deemed to be beautiful to a particular gaze. As such, this study intersects with others in the Library that show how body image is multifaceted and also open to wider forces in society.

Theorising gaze is a common theme in many of the books in this Library, and here Ormrod is able to engage in an historical argument around this, focusing on the character of Wonder Woman. Consciously clothed in the American flag, Wonder Woman represents a form of American national identity. This costume design is something Ormrod explores in some detail, charting the historical and cultural shifts that influence the clothing of both Wonder Woman and her sometime alter

ego, Diana Prince. However, as an Amazonian, she is also symbolic of all-female relationships. This is something Ormrod offers a tantalising glimpse of in this book, with particular insight into the ways in which different historical periods have chosen to interpret this aspect of the character. As other books in this Library suggest, gender and sexuality are constantly in a state of flux, with the focus here being the 75 years during which the Wonder Woman character has been in popular culture.

Angela Smith and Claire Nally

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Introduction

Wonder Woman and the Body in Popular Culture

On 24 August 2017, director James Cameron prompted controversy with his opinion of Patty Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* film in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper:

All of the self-congratulatory back-patting Hollywood's been doing over Wonder Woman has been so misguided. She's an objectified icon, and it's just male Hollywood doing the same old thing! I'm not saying I didn't like the movie but, to me, it's a step backwards. Sarah Connor was not a beauty icon. She was strong, she was troubled, she was a terrible mother, and she earned the respect of the audience through pure grit.¹

The statement prompted a furious response from fans who attacked Cameron's films and his personal life. However, Cameron was correct – to a point – in talking about the need for the fantasy heroine to be more than an objectified icon. His description of Wonder Woman as no more than an objectified icon was misguided but one held by a large percentage of people. For instance, on her 75th anniversary on 21 October 2016, Wonder Woman was appointed United Nations Honorary Ambassador for girls' empowerment. This decision attracted criticism by UN staff who set up an online petition attracting 45,020 signatures calling for the decision to be reversed. They rationalized their protest thus: 'Although the original creators may have intended Wonder Woman to represent a strong and independent 'warrior' woman with a feminist message, the reality is that the character's current iteration is that of a large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions, scantily clad in a shimmery, thigh-baring body suit.'²

Despite opposition by Wonder Woman fans, on 16 December 2016 the UN revoked their decision. Neither the UN staff nor Cameron looked at whether a woman cannot be both beautiful and a gritty heroine, or even that there might be a different model for heroism beyond gritty.³ This point was made by Jenkins, who tweeted in response to Cameron: ‘if women have to always be hard, tough and troubled to be strong, and we aren’t free to be multidimensional or celebrate an icon of women everywhere because she is attractive and loving, then we haven’t come very far have we.’⁴

It does prompt the question: why cannot female heroes be multidimensional? What is at stake in analysing them through debates about objectification? If female action heroes can only be regarded through such debates, then is it surprising that discussion, in academia and wider culture, continually returns to gender and sex? These examples, which speak from a lack of knowledge of the character and all she stands for, raise a contradiction at the heart of Wonder Woman’s creation and representation. Both revolve around her sexualized representation and highlight the contradictory nature of the character and the ways her body is represented that seem out of tune with her feminist message.

This book incorporates Wonder Woman’s cultural construction with a focus on mainly female bodies in several decades of comic and other media adaptations, to identify how and why she represents such diverse facades to the world. The book spans key stories, mainly in comic books, and each chapter deals with specific decades, from her appearance in 1941 to the present. My aim is to illustrate how comics have responded to changes in cultural perceptions and constructions of female bodies since the early 1940s and, through this, to determine the journey made by women in Western culture in the past seventy years.

The superhero genre is a genre about bodies and their representation and it acts as a metaphor for how we idealize certain types of bodies in wider culture. The idealized body is a fluid concept, for it changes from era to era. For instance, the Superman of the 1960s has more bulk and musculature, and is older than the Superman of the twenty-first century.

However, where male heroes are defined by their musculature, female characters are often defined by gender-specific elements – breasts, waists, hair. As illustrated in the examples above, this can present a paradox between regarding the superheroine as an icon for empowerment or an object of sexualized disempowerment. Wonder Woman presents such a paradox: on the one hand a fetishized sex object, on the other an empowering feminist. In an impassioned argument, Carolyn Cocca states that such representations matter: ‘You are more likely to imagine yourself as a hero if you see yourself represented as a hero [...] Marginalized groups have been forced to “cross-identify” with those different from them while dominant groups have not.’⁵ The female, according to Cocca, must either identify with media models of female empowerment or cross-identify with the saturation of powerful male heroes on offer. Cocca has a point. Thinking of Wonder Woman, she is relatively unknown through her comic but well known in popular culture. She can be regarded as a ‘mobile signifier’, well known in broader culture but not through her original stories.⁶ Part of the reason she is unknown is that *Wonder Woman* was rarely adapted through media texts until Patty Jenkins’s 2017 film. Until then, *Wonder Woman* was known mainly through a television series starring Lynda Carter (1975–79) and in popular culture, where she was encountered through fantasy dress-up, pornography and centrefolds, on the one hand, and, on the other, as an empowering figure for young girls and underrepresented groups such as women and LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual or allied).⁷ Despite her inspirational qualities, Wonder Woman is still regarded as a sexually objectified character whose body is under constant debate. She is, as Jeffery Brown argues, ‘overburdened as both a symbol of feminist agency in a genre rooted in masculine power fantasies and as a sexual fetish in visually oriented mediums that continue to present women as erotic ideals above all else.’⁸

The sexualization of female heroes is an ongoing debate in superhero research and fandom. This goes back to the early superhero comics and the superhero paradigm, Superman, whose costume was modelled on the circus strongman costume, designed to display musculature. The superhero body is clothed in a skin-tight costume that, in most cases, is little more than a costume drawn over a nude figure. The muscular male and the sexual female bodies were products of the overlapping media and comic book industries, comic book industry distribution, creative practices and fandoms. Most focused on male interests for assumed male audiences.

Creators, for instance, were predominantly young men and, as comics progressed through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, some fans became creators who continued or exaggerated previous art practices and styles.

The critique or focus on the sexualized representation of heroines, particularly Wonder Woman, has been argued many times.⁹ This is not my strategy. Rather than critique the disempowered female body, I explore how the female body is culturally and philosophically constructed using a discursive analysis. This was argued in the past by researchers such as Mitra Emad, who used Benedict Anderson's work on the imaginary construction of the nation, focusing on four points in American history and culture – the 1940s, 1950s, 1970s and 1980s – to argue that Wonder Woman's body reflected the cultural mores of these times in relation to her occupation of the private and the public sphere.¹⁰ For instance, in the 1940s, Wonder Woman, like many women joining the war effort, became part of the public sphere but had to conform to traditional female roles of subordination to masculine authority. Dawn Heineken examined three characters from 1990s television and observed that where violence was externalized on the male body, it was internalized on the female body.¹¹ I argued that a somatic approach was viable, using the bad girl comics of the 1990s as a case study.¹² The importance of emotion to female heroism was noted by both Heineken and Jennifer Stuller.¹³ Stuller, like Cocca, was concerned about the ways female heroism was represented, claiming that superheroines 'teach us

about our socially appropriate roles, how we fit into our communities, and about our human potential [...].¹⁴ Stuller proposed that when we consider female heroism, the male hero myth of redemption through violence is an ineffective model as the female hero's journey is based on love. She argues that love and the family are empowering in certain female hero narratives.¹⁵ By family, Stuller means the supportive group who often gather around, and are inspired by, the female hero.

The supportive and inspirational role of the heroine is built into Wonder Woman's origin and early stories. Her creator, William Moulton Marston,¹⁶ suggested that his heroine would redeem through love, which, he argued, was a specific female quality and could save humanity from war. In his version of *Wonder Woman*, love was not a weakness but a powerful force for redemption. Marston, however, worked on the basis of essentialized gendered identities, since challenged by theorists such as Judith Butler.¹⁷

This analysis contextualizes the body over several eras from the 1940s as culturally defined, a phenomenological and a social object. The analyses begin from how bodies are represented in the comics, identifying how they are informed by discourses circulating in specific eras. Issues that will be analysed include the markers of identity on the body, such as ethnicity, race, gender and ideas of beauty, and issues concerning the superhero genre, such as the secret identity, costume and masks. The final chapter departs from this model to engage with Wonder Woman within her broader media and cultural compass. In this chapter, the impact of fandom through social media and promotional culture is explored using Thornton's notion of subcultural capital to compare Jenkins's film with the television series starring Lynda Carter.¹⁸

This chapter begins by examining Wonder Woman's origins and her ideological construction within the context of her first comics in the early 1940s. Her creator William Marston's aims in creating the character, aided by several strong women in his life, laid the foundations for recurring tropes such as her gendered, racial and ethnic identities up to the present. The chapter continues by analysing the various

somatic tropes in *Wonder Woman* that impact on the later chapters of the book.

Beginnings

Wonder Woman was published at a pivotal moment for America, as it was in the same month, December 1941, that Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese, and America entered the Second World War. Characters in the superhero genre, born only three years earlier with the advent of Superman, were already conscripted into the war effort and fought the Axis powers on the battlefield and their agents inside and outside of America. Wonder Woman was no different from her male counterparts. The first Wonder Woman story, recounting her origin, was not even signalled on the cover, but tucked away at the back of *All-Star Comics* 8, December 1941. Wonder Woman featured on the cover and headlined the first issue of *Sensation Comics* in January 1942.

By summer 1942, her signature comic and newspaper strips were published. Comics in the 1940s were distributed and sold on newspaper stands; sales were approximately 25 million to 40 million per month and most comics featured superheroes.¹⁹ Readership was equally male/female and Wonder Woman's popularity was robust enough for her to acquire her own title within six months of first publication.²⁰ In an era when comics were selling in the millions, her sales figures may have been six figures or higher.²¹ Her coverage was given a more general basis when she also starred in her own newspaper strip.

Wonder Woman's origin is told in three separate stories in *All-Star Comics*, *Sensation Comics* and *Wonder Woman*,²² and is rooted in Greek and Roman myth. She is a princess of the Amazons, daughter of Queen Hippolyta.²³ She comes to man's world to teach and inspire humanity in the ways of love and peace. Wonder Woman's story includes recurring themes of feminism, sexuality, ethnicity, Amazons, magic, science, the Greek gods, immigration and war. It also reflects earlier myths and fairy tales such as Pygmalion and Galatea, Sleeping Beauty, the biblical

creation myth and Samson. The story goes that in ancient times the earth was ruled by Ares, God of War (hereafter Mars) and Aphrodite, Goddess of love and beauty. Under Mars' rule women were mistreated by men, 'sold as slaves – they were cheaper than cattle'.²⁴ To counter this abuse, Aphrodite created a race of strong, beautiful women, the Amazons, from clay and made Hippolyta their queen. Hippolyta was unconquerable as long as she wore Aphrodite's magic girdle, the source of her power. The Amazons built a marvellous city that seemed inviolable until attacked by Hercules, an agent of Mars. Hercules defeated Hippolyta, appealing to her vanity, and stole her magic girdle and the strength bestowed upon her by Aphrodite. He and his men enslaved the Amazons. Hippolyta prayed to Aphrodite, who returned her strength, and she defeated Hercules. Led by Aphrodite, the Amazons retreated to a haven, Paradise Island, where they built 'a splendid city which no man may enter – a paradise for women only'.²⁵ The Amazons' disobedience did not go unpunished. Aphrodite ordered them to wear the manacles that Hercules' men shackled to their wrists, 'to teach you the folly of submitting to men's domination'.²⁶ The manacles became the bracelets of submission. If they were taken off the Amazon became a berserker, imitating man's violence, bent only on destruction.

In this all-female society, there are no children, but Hippolyta carved a statue of a female child and Aphrodite gave the statue life, naming it Diana.²⁷ Diana quickly demonstrated her superiority to her sisters in her strength and speed. At three she pulled up a tree by its roots, at five she raced deer through the forest. The Amazons commented: 'Already our little princess has the strength of Hercules!', 'The queen's child is swifter than Mercury!'²⁸ At sixteen Diana was inducted into the Amazon sisterhood, receiving her bracelets of submission and drinking from the Fountain of Eternal Youth, which kept the Amazons forever young and beautiful.

The Amazons' self-imposed exile was interrupted when a plane piloted by Steve Trevor, an American airman, crashed into the sea off Paradise Island. Diana fell in love with him, inventing a purple healing ray to save his life, and nursed him back to health. Aphrodite decided

that Man's world needed Amazon values to inspire peace; consequently she ordered Hippolyta to select the strongest Amazon to return Trevor to America and bring Amazon values to Man's world. Hippolyta declared a contest to choose the Amazon who would take him back and Diana, in disguise, won. Although Hippolyta was horrified, she gave Diana a costume inspired by the American flag and later a golden lasso that impelled those bound to submit to the will of those who have bound them. Once in America, Diana disguised herself as nurse Diana Prince so she can be near Trevor, the man she loves, help him in his war against spies and inspire female equality. To that end, she gathered to her a cadre of female helpers, predominantly Etta Candy and the Holliday Girls, a sorority sisterhood of female helpers.

William Moulton Marston, Harry G. Peter and the Comic Book Industry

Wonder Woman's Amazon roots are significant elements in her story. Indeed, her Amazon ethnicity is integral to the ideological construction of her world. For, unlike Superman and Batman, Wonder Woman's story world is constructed as a 'pure political, philosophical fantasy [...] utterly well-realised fantasy world'.²⁹ She was, as suggested above, created to inspire girls to become stronger and boys to become more loving. These ideas were written into her story as crucial to her mission and they were also meant to influence culture outside of the comic books. As Molly Rhodes suggests, she was not just created to battle the evil of Nazism 'but to be an agent in a culture war *within* the United States'.³⁰ The Second World War was a time when women were expected to contribute to the war effort by taking on work in industry and the militia. However, although they had won the vote in 1920, by 1941 they still had to combat prejudice and misogyny.³¹

Although she was not the first female superhero, Wonder Woman was the most visually identifiable, as Marston and Peter wisely, in the context of the Second World War, chose to clothe her in the American

flag. Like other heroes such as Superman, her first appearance was in the new format, the comic book anthology. The superhero genre emerged alongside four-colour printing and a new media form, the comic book. The comic book in this era consisted of anthologies of cartoons, collected from the Sunday newspaper comic strips.³² From their initial use as a means of selling pre-existing comic strips, comic books developed original stories and characters. The most significant character in the change from anthology to character-based comic books is Superman in *Action Comics* 1.³³ The formula for the first Superman story set in place the paradigm for early superhero comics, including the secret identity, the unknown childhood and contentious love relationships.³⁴ In the consequent explosion of superheroes copying Superman, women appeared as sidekicks or love interests, there to be rescued or to constitute a nuisance to the superhero's mission.³⁵ It was to challenge the notion of a hero who used only his fists to regenerate the land³⁶ that Wonder Woman was created by William Moulton Marston, aided by his wife, Elizabeth Holloway, and his lover, Olive Richard.³⁷

Marston had an ideological agenda in creating Wonder Woman, for he was not originally a comic book or strip creator. Marston was a 'cultural amphibian', an academic and populist writer who wrote extensively on human emotions and gender.³⁸ His academic and populist work can be roughly divided into two eras, the academic work up to the mid-1930s and his populist work from the mid-1930s onwards. His ideas and aberrant lifestyle are perceived to be the reasons for his move towards popular work.³⁹ Marston's academic research and writing were founded upon 'deviant science', a term 'reclaimed by contemporary queer theory' as the art of a revised history of sexuality by contemporary queer scholars.⁴⁰ Marston was trained in law and gained a PhD in psychology at Harvard. He worked as a lecturer and researcher in prestigious higher education institutions such as New York University, the University of Southern California and Columbia University, and was a prolific writer, publishing twelve articles and books between 1917 and 1934.⁴¹ His academic career began with empirical studies on human

emotions and subjectivity, using a version of the systolic polygraph lie detector he developed during the First World War. He used the lie detector in experiments on the emotions of returning soldiers and women students at Radcliffe. On the basis of his experiments with the lie detector, Marston devised the Dominance, Inducement, Submission and Compliance system (DISC), which sought to explain human interactions and formed the underpinning values of his creation of Wonder Woman.⁴²

Marston and Peter were older than other comic book creators; Marston was in his early fifties, Peter was in his early sixties. Compared with the comic books and strips created, written and drawn by other creators in the superhero genre who were in their early twenties, Marston and Peter articulated the values of the early twentieth century. This is signalled in a curiously dated image on the cover of *Wonder Woman* 1, where she is represented leading a charge of American soldiers on a white horse leaping over the Nazi trenches.⁴³ Although supposedly set in the Second World War, the image looks more like a First World War scene. Nevertheless, it is an accomplished drawing, yet different from that of the superhero comic drawings by younger artists such as Joe Shuster, Jack Kirby and Jerry Robinson. Peter's panels are more staged and posed. Marston and Peter's work was also accredited, a rare accolade in comics at that time. The ideas and imagery Marston and Peter introduced in these early comics are the benchmark against which most of the later iterations of the character are measured, challenged or remain inspirational sources.

After Marston

Wonder Woman's origin story has appeared in one form or another in the past seventy-five years, but has been adjusted in each era. These revisions are significant because they show how far the comic book industry and the creators' aims change from William Marston's ideological vision and the Second World War's cultural values, and

they have been thoroughly analysed in Cocca's excellent study of superheroines.⁴⁴

As Marston's health failed in the late 1940s, Joye Murchison took over writing some of the stories, and on Marston's death Peter continued to draw the heroine, with the storylines taken over by jobbing writer Robert Kanigher.⁴⁵ Marston's vision of a feminist revolution inspired by the war did not happen. Rather, in the early 1950s, more traditional views of female domesticity, consumerism and youth culture were foregrounded in an America intent on returning to more traditional male and female roles. There were also moral panics about perceived threats to traditional, 'common-sense' notions of a white, male middle-class world order. These included the witch hunt to discover communists in American culture prompted by Senator Joe McCarthy and moral panics about juvenile delinquency. Comic books were included in a concerted attack on juvenile delinquency, communism and the feminization of American culture. The attack was spearheaded in 1954 by the publication of *The Seduction of the Innocent* by psychologist Dr Fredric Wertham. Wonder Woman was one of the superhero characters identified by Wertham as psychologically harmful to children. His opinion was based on the 1950s perception of traditional family values in which the wife and mother stayed at home to raise the children and tend the house: 'she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to be'.⁴⁶ The fears of the impact of comic books on juvenile delinquency led to the imposition of a self-regulatory system, the Comics Code Authority (CCA), by the comic book industry.⁴⁷ In the newly regulated superhero genre, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman all acquired families and their stories were stripped of any contentious material.⁴⁸

The cosy familial setting of the superhero comic changed in 1960 when Timely, a rival comic book company, published a new superhero comic, *The Fantastic Four*. The Fantastic Four were a group of superheroes who did not wear costumes or have secret identities and continually squabbled, and they inspired a new direction in the superhero genre that made the DC output seem trivial and old

fashioned. Timely Comics renamed themselves Marvel and produced a stable of superheroes that breathed life into the superhero genre, appealing to slightly older and more educated college audiences.⁴⁹ Marvel superheroes such as Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk and the X-Men seemed more in tune with teenage markets. Marvel actively courted countercultural teenage markets in the later 1960s, visiting colleges and developing Marvel devotees as a specific fandom. At this time, comic book fandom developed because of companies like Marvel publishing fans' addresses and so enabling them to contact each other. Marvel superheroes had similar life experiences as their readers, and contended with poverty, bullying, sickness and rejection by society and loved ones. Marvel also introduced social realism and countercultural values such as drugs, feminism and civil rights into superhero stories. To counter Marvel's growing popularity, DC Comics updated their superheroes. Wonder Woman was revamped by writer Denny O'Neil and artist Mike Sekowsky, who were charged with bringing Wonder Woman up to date. Accordingly, they took away her powers, costume and Amazon heritage and she became an action chick. Wonder Woman as action chick lasted twenty-four issues and then was hurriedly dropped in the face of feminist criticism, failing comic book sales and DC's desire to return Wonder Woman to her original powers and costume.⁵⁰ However, Wonder Woman became foregrounded in the American consciousness through the television series starring Lynda Carter (1975–79), which ran for three seasons. Carter's depiction attracted a fan following, especially amongst gay men and women, that continues to the present.⁵¹ Such is Carter's association with the character that her face was adopted by later artists such as Alex Toth, and was used in the creation of a digital comic, *Wonder Woman '77*, with cover art by Nicola Scott and Phil Jiminez, based on the television series, as well as in the DC team-up comic books *Batman '66* and the *Bionic Woman*.⁵²

The 1980s saw a rise in consumerism and public relations culture, the beginnings of global media and a right-wing backlash against feminism under the Ronald Reagan presidency.⁵³ In the comic book industry, the 1980s also saw the introduction of the graphic novel form,

aimed at promoting comics as a mature media form with adult content. During this decade there was a boom in the sales of graphic novels with the publication of some iconic titles such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1987) that redefined the superhero genre into something darker and more violent.⁵⁴ In 1986 DC Comics simplified its universe, revising its main characters, and Wonder Woman was given a revised origin, as an innocent-abroad character, Diana, Themysciran ambassador to Man's world. Her Wonder Woman title was conferred by a PR agent. George Pérez's revision of the character is much admired by fans and influenced many of the later versions of Wonder Woman up to 2011, whether emulating or resisting his reverential approach.

Since Pérez there has been a multitude of writers and artists, each bringing new supporting characters and reinventing her story. The stories in this era tend to be in constant flux, with new writers and artists who revise Wonder Woman's story world and, in some cases, discard storylines and characters that previous creative teams were developing. This can lead to confusion in readers and a lack of connection. For instance, John Byrne's stories focused on her relationship with Hippolyta and made her into a real, rather than symbolic, goddess. In the 1990s comic books' representations changed due to changes in distribution, point of sale, creation and publishing. It is worth reflecting on how changes in point of sale and distribution affected the representation of Wonder Woman.

In the 1940s through to the late 1970s, comics were sold through newsstands to mass audiences.⁵⁵ In the 1940s to 1960 there is evidence that they were read by boys and girls almost equally. For instance, the Market Research Company of America reported that 95 per cent of boys and 91 per cent of girls aged 6–11 read comics.⁵⁶ Disparities showed between the ages of 18–30, when 41 per cent of males against 28 per cent of females read comics. Selling to newsstands meant the comics that did not sell could be returned to the publisher. Publishers began to sell directly to specialist shops from the early 1970s and by the late 1970s comics were sold mostly through comic book shops. Comic book shops ghettoized fandom, discouraging women and children from entering.⁵⁷

In the UK, for instance, pornography was sold in the backs of the shops. Trina Robbins notes the circular logic of the comic book industry; publishers assumed women did not read comics so they did not produce comics, leading to women reading fewer comics.⁵⁸ Eventually the female market dwindled.⁵⁹ As many of the creators were young males for mainly young male audiences, it is of little surprise the representations of women were highly sexualized and at times, such as the 'bad girl' era, little more than softcore porn.⁶⁰ Wonder Woman was subjected to a bad girl makeover in William Messner-Loebs and Mike Deodato Jr's short but impactful run of 1992–95 in which Deodato's stunning imagery introduced highly sexualized images of Diana and the Amazons. Messner-Loebs and Deodato Jr introduced a note of discord in the Amazon message of peace and love, showing a darker side of Hippolyta and racial conflict within the Amazons in 'The Contest'.⁶¹

From the late 1990s to the 2000s the magical origin and Amazon concord were discarded entirely in favour of a more brutal and cynical depiction of the race, reflecting a general escalation in violence in the superhero genre. 9/11 also encouraged creators to question the role of the vigilante in the previous fifteen years. Wonder Woman too changed in this period to become more worldly-wise, in some cases uncharacteristically violent and exhibiting paradoxical behaviour; she committed murder on global television, was the ambassador for Themyscira, was involved in a terrorist war between the Amazons and America, and wrote a spiritual, self-help book.⁶²

In recent years, the niche male comic book market has been challenged, with many young women becoming more interested in comics through more thoughtful and cleverly contrived graphic novels in DC Comics' Vertigo line and manga. The positive promotion of female titles in DC and Marvel, more female creators and editors such as Karen Berger, and the development of cross-media narratives (this is discussed in more depth in Chapter 6) also encouraged more girls than ever to read superhero stories.

Contemporary *Wonder Woman* comics have moved away from sexual objectification, possibly due to DC's attempt to appeal to female

audiences. Since 2011, with the New 52 and Rebirth story arcs, Wonder Woman's presence is promoted in the broadest range of comics since the 1940s and increasingly through other media such as film, television and video games. In *Wonder Woman (The New 52)*, Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang (2011–14) emphasize her mythic background. She also became Superman's lover in a separate comic, *Superman and Wonder Woman*. The short-lived, but much admired, *Sensation Comics* tapped into her rich back story and her universe. Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette produced a standalone graphic novel that, according to Morrison, is based upon Marston's philosophy, and Jill Thompson's standalone graphic novel *Wonder Woman: The True Amazon* won the prestigious Eisner Award for graphic narrative in 2017.⁶³ There are spin-offs in the *Amazon Odyssey*, *The Legend of Wonder Woman* and *Bombshells* and cute character adaptations in *Superhero High* and *Super Powers*, DC's attempt to attract younger audiences. Since the 1990s, Wonder Woman has moved over into other media but, as noted above, to a lesser extent than her male counterparts. Wonder Woman appeared in several children's animated cartoons such as *Superfriends*, *Young Justice* and various *Justice League of America* animated television series and standalone films.⁶⁴ Many of these series were promoted through toys and collectables. Her cultural visibility was sustained in fan creativity: collecting, performing in cosplay, fan art, comics, fanfic and 'zines such as *Princessions* in the late 1980s.⁶⁵ Her transmedia appeal is promoted in online games, dedicated websites and social media. The success of the standalone *Wonder Woman* film assured her inclusion in the *Justice League* (2017) film and forthcoming DC Extended Universe (DCEU) projects, including a sequel to the first *Wonder Woman* film.

The Superhero Body and the Superheroine Narrative Trajectory

The first issue that should be dealt with is in the differences between the female and the male hero's narrative trajectories. Wonder Woman was

created in the superhero genre, an intensely masculine genre in which violence was endemic. However, she was created to show how love rather than violence could redeem, a different journey from the traditional American hero. According to Richard Slotkin, the American frontier myth, in which the frontier forms the boundary between civilization and savagery, is based upon a mythology of violence.⁶⁶ Such violence was necessary within the American mythmaking process to address the necessity of American expansion against the dispossession of land from Native Americans. Slotkin is concerned with explaining the myths that produce a sense of national identity. He argues that the myth of the frontier was developed into a myth of a secular society in which conflicts re-enact previous wars the ways literature processes historical events. Myth represents its beliefs through exemplars of good and evil to demonstrate and affirm ideologies. Myth therefore 'uses the past as an "idealized example"' in which 'a heroic achievement in the past is linked with another in the future of which the reader is the potential hero.'⁶⁷ Children perform a symbolic re-enactment of the frontier myth when they play cowboys and Indians. More significantly, later conflicts, such as Vietnam, are couched in terms relating them to frontier wars of the past.⁶⁸ The conflicts between settlers and Native Americans were couched in a binary of the civilized war versus the savage war.

The frontier myth is one of violence but it is a story about the male hero. Female heroes do not always conform to this trajectory and it is noticeable that Wonder Woman's most popular story arcs are usually based upon emotion according to Carolyn Cocca.⁶⁹ This theme underpins many of the narratives in the later iterations of Wonder Woman and contributes to an atypical heroic journey.

Although constructed out of a different ideological basis, Wonder Woman's appearance and powers are modelled on Superman. Her powers are like Superman's. She is strong, can hear and see extremely well, can leap very high, speaks every language ever invented, including to animals, is super-intelligent and inventive, and in the early stories she is telepathic. Her look is modelled on Superman; her costume comprises the three primary colours inspired by the American flag.

Wonder Woman's Stars and Stripes inspired costume is like several other characters from the Second World War such as Uncle Sam, Miss Liberty, The Shield, Super-American, The Fighting Yank and Captain America. The iconic status of the flag provides readers with instant recognition on the page,⁷⁰ and in donning the American flag as her costume Wonder Woman automatically aligns herself with national values.⁷¹ One other crucial aspect of Wonder Woman/Diana Prince's costume is the mask. Male heroes often wear masks to conceal their identities and they show their faces in their secret identities. They 'hide in plain sight'.⁷² The mask articulates a fluidity of contemporary identity in which the face is concealed and the body becomes more expressive. However, in Wonder Woman and Superman, the opposite is true. As Clark Kent and Diana Prince, Superman and Wonder Woman conceal their faces behind glasses that act as masks. The concealment is gendered: wearing glasses connotes weakness and femininity in Clark Kent, lack of attractiveness in Diana Prince. In both, the glasses connote the diminution of desirable gender attributes. In their unmasked identities, both bodies become more dynamic and command the comic's panel and page.

Ironically, Wonder Woman's weapons are also the source of her vulnerability for if she is unshackled from her bracelets of submission she becomes a berserker. Her bracelets of submission are used to deflect bullets, originally in the Amazon game, bullets and bracelets, for unlike Superman she is not invulnerable. She has an invisible plane that can carry her between worlds. The weapon that most concerns critics, however, is the golden lasso, introduced in *Sensation Comics* 6. Originally the golden lasso was forged from Hippolyta's girdle, given to her by Aphrodite; it forced those bound to obey the orders of the binder, prompting Wonder Woman to reflect: 'I can change human character! I can make bad men good, and weak women strong!'⁷³ The lasso later evolved into the lasso of truth, forcing the truth out of those bound by it, no doubt in recognition of Marston's lie detector.⁷⁴ Given that she is the iconic superheroine and her weapons (a lasso and manacles) are reminiscent of bondage and sado-masochism in the porn genre, it is

unsurprising to learn that she was the inspiration for other superheroines of the 1940s. ‘Good girl art’, a style coined in the 1970s by collectors of comics and pulp fiction, represented women in the pin-up tradition with large breasts, wearing skimpy clothing and posing in sometimes titillating situations. Richard Reynolds proposes that the iconography of the subgenre ‘takes all the signs of pornographic discourse [...] and integrates them into the context of non-pornographic story structures.’⁷⁵ However, as discussed above, this takes a rather simplistic view of Marston’s reasons for representing Wonder Woman in this way.

Ethnicity and Queer Bodies: Amazons

Wonder Woman’s Amazon heritage is predicated on the exotic and imaginary. The Amazon heritage is a key element in Wonder Woman’s story, more so than her secret identity. Wonder Woman’s Amazon heritage highlights concerns over ethnicity, gender and sexuality, concerns that repeat cultural issues in the representation of Amazons from Antiquity and recur throughout her history. The Amazons’ inclusion in stories in Western culture emphasizes their Otherness, as suggested by Claire Pitkethly: ‘Amazon encounters serve to define, through negation, the cultural identity of those who encounter her.’⁷⁶

The Amazons were invented in Greek myths as a warning to men of the Classical world of allowing women too much power.⁷⁷ Amazons existed on the margins of maps from medieval times, where they represented one of the monstrous races thought to exist in the unknown lands of America in the early sixteenth century. Marston’s depiction of a utopian female society on Paradise Island challenges more traditional models of the Amazons as monstrous and unruly women. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, narratives of Amazons emerged that might have been influenced by calls for female suffrage. Jill Lepore proposes that in this era ‘Amazons were everywhere’ and gives as examples a collection of poems by Max Eastman, *Child of the Amazons and Other Poems*, and Inez Haynes Gillmore’s novel *Angel Island*.⁷⁸

The Amazons are an integral part of the Wonder Woman universe whether they are present or absent. When present they often constitute a domestic environment or an arena of conflict between Wonder Woman and humanity's world. When missing, they become an absent presence, a source of longing or quest that constantly engages Wonder Woman's thoughts and longings.⁷⁹ Of significance in Amazon discourse is their spatial location as liminal, neither here nor there.⁸⁰ In Greek and later medieval legends, they existed in unknown lands or on the margins of maps – unruly and monstrous women who must be either tamed or destroyed.⁸¹ In Marston's stories, Wonder Woman's assimilation into American culture demonstrates America's willingness to embrace the racialized Other.⁸² In his stories and some of the subsequent versions of Wonder Woman, the Amazons exist in an uncharted location, hidden from the world of men. Marston represents Paradise Island as a utopia, an example to patriarchy of the benefits of female empowerment.⁸³ Since Marston's death, however, Amazons have either been represented as housewives who turned their backs on patriarchy after the death of their menfolk (1950s, 1960s and Lynda Carter's television series in the late 1970s), a pagan society that worships a female pantheon (1980s and 1990s), a fractured society torn apart by immigration and dissenting disempowered tribes (1990s to the present), or enraged harpies intent on destroying men in response to perceived insults (early twenty-first century). The latest version of the Amazons in Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* focuses on the fetishized female hard body of the action genre, generally considered one of the strongest elements of the film.⁸⁴

Wonder Woman's Amazon ethnicity is integral to her original mission to bring female peace and love to Man's world. In the 1950s and 1960s, under Robert Kanigher, Wonder Woman's mission was to eliminate evil from Man's world, suitable reason for her to remain forever unmarried. Her unmarried, and presumably virginal, status, was very much an integral part of her Amazon identity and her association with the virginal Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt. As Cocca notes, Wonder Woman is one of a kind, created as a queer character, her fortunes fluctuate depending on the social values of each era and her

representation is negotiated between distribution, production and audiences.⁸⁵ Greg Rucka, one of the key comics writers of *Wonder Woman* in the past twenty years stated that, as a society of only women, same-sex relationships were inevitable.⁸⁶ Despite her love for a man, Steve Trevor, on entering Man's world she gathers a network of women supporters, college girls who combat Nazism by love and allure.

Career Woman/Trickster: Diana Prince

As noted above, Superman set the model for superheroes in the so-called Golden Age and one of the tropes of the superhero identity was the secret identity. Usually the secret identity is a drab counterpart to the hero. Interestingly, Wonder Woman's alter ego, Diana Prince, represented a more realistic depiction of women's lives in the Second World War, where she was shown as an efficient nurse and personal assistant. Nevertheless, she supposedly looked plain and sexually repressed wearing glasses and her hair tied in a bun. However, this did not acknowledge the importance of the character in the Second World War, when the government was concerned with attracting women into the services and industry to help in the war effort. Diana Prince represented the ordinary working woman in the war, a capable professional and a trickster.⁸⁷ The secret identity, like abstinence from sex, acted as a taboo to limit the hero's powers, a payment for power.⁸⁸ The secret identity connected what in some cases was a godlike being to ordinary human experiences.

Diana Prince's fortunes fluctuated depending on the era in which Wonder Woman was revised. In the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Kanigher had problems reconciling Diana Prince as career woman with a prevailing notion of the woman as belonging in the domestic environment. In the late 1960s, with the emergence of second-wave feminism, Diana Prince emerged from Wonder Woman's shadow to become a mod fashionista with no powers but with exemplary fighting skills.⁸⁹ In the 1980s, George Pérez discarded the secret identity and