

FEMALE BONDING

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF WONDER WOMAN

We all love Wonder Woman, but when I sent in my final edits for "Female Bonding" in 2006, I never could have predicted the outpouring of assent that would result from the piece's publication. Since the day this article hit newsstands, I've received an incredible amount of emails and letters from around the world, from people surprised and excited by the Amazon princess's origins.

But while it's been cool to be interviewed by radio programs, cited in books and papers, and assigned in gender and sexuality courses, the biggest thrill for me has come from being able to geek out with other fans and have fun, frank discussions on why the yearning for Wonder Woman continues, and, most intriguingly, why her sexual history remains so veiled, even as the comics medium itself becomes more and more elevated. Indeed, comics culture, though perhaps more diverse than ever, continues to heterosexualize the leading lady whose phrase of choice was once "Suffering Sappho!"

Since 2006, Wonder Woman has been the subject of a documentary (Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroes*), a bestselling book (Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*), and a heady amount of academic scholarship. But she also remains a symbol of American culture's inability to see women, even fictional ones, in more than one dimension. (The Joss Whedon movie I mentioned in this piece, for instance, never happened.) I continue to imagine (and hope for) a portrayal of Wonder Woman that does justice to her gorgeous complexity.

"Bind me as tight as you can, girls, with the biggest ropes and chains you can find!"

THE WOMAN IS SMILING IN ECSTASY, plastered against a large wooden beam, ropes and chains taut against her body, as she begs her captors, a group of jubilant, scantily clad young women, to pull her shackles just a little bit tighter. The girls taunt their captive: "We are, Princess, even you can't escape these bonds!"

The scene reads like the climax of a story in *Best Bondage Erotica*, rather than something from a 1940s-era comic book. As for its subject, most of us know her as that sexy superhero with the racy, star-spangled hot pants and eagle-emblazoned bustier who caught our attention as the star of a campy television show in the 1970s. But like all superheroes and comic-book characters, Wonder Woman has gone through major changes over the years, and before

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she was the earnest do-gooder of '70s tv, she was a bondage-lovin' Golden Age superstar. Despite her status as a feminist icon, few feminists truly know the depth and character of this feisty gal's origins.

Though she was preceded in the comic-book pages by Red Tornado—a housewife who transformed into a whirlwind to get her housekeeping done—Wonder Woman was, in 1941, the first female comic-book character to be called a superhero. The creation of William Marston, a psychologist and self-proclaimed feminist, Wonder Woman was conceived as an antidote to what Marston saw as a troubling lack of female superheroes and an abundance of violence in the comic-book medium.

Feminism as Marston defined it was less about advocating gender equality and fighting sexism than it was a variant of the 19th-century temperance movement, which held that women were morally superior to men and, as such, responsible for controlling their appetites. Marston, who invented a precursor to the modern-day lie-detector test and was a top researcher in submission-and-domination sexuality, thought that society's male-wrought problems would be solved by women—who, unlike men, would rule the world with love, compassion, and justice. In November 1937, Marston predicted as much to the *New York Times*: “[T]he next one hundred years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy—a nation of Amazons in the psychological rather than physical sense.”

In the context of modern feminism, Marston's female-dominance hopes might seem deeply flawed, but his politics were progressive for their time. He truly believed that it was his duty to make people realize that the only way to peace and justice was through the leadership and advancement of women—but first he had to figure out how to relay his message of female superiority to the masses of unbelievers.

Comics were the fastest-growing creative medium of the early 1940s, and although they were (and often still are)

scorned as juvenile, they were nevertheless a powerful media source that could influence a large audience of young, mostly male readers. (According to *Wonder Woman* historian Les Daniels, it's been estimated that up to 90 percent of readers of *Wonder Woman* comics have been male.) Marston brought his ideas to M.C. Gaines, the head of Sensation Comics. Gaines, who was more intrigued by the idea of a female superhero than by Marston's feminist agenda, gave Marston the go-ahead and Wonder Woman her first home.

From the start, *Wonder Woman* was a conglomeration of many efforts. Most histories of the comic note male players such as Marston, Gaines, and artist H.G. Peter, but women had a significant role in its creation. Under a thinly veiled pen name (Charles Moulton), Marston wrote all the stories, but various male and female artists illustrated the comics and contributed ideas to the creation of a strong, dominant, self-sufficient woman. Marston was also assisted by his two marital partners, Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne. (The three maintained a polyamorous relationship in a time when even the hint of unconventional sexuality was socially unacceptable; in fact, after Marston's death, Holloway Marston and Byrne remained committed to one another and raised their four children together.)

Together these artists created the perfect spokesperson for Marston's ideals. From the first panel of the inaugural issue, it is apparent that Wonder Woman, an Amazon from Paradise Island—a society inhabited by superwomen—has an agenda. Wonder Woman leaps onto the page with a star-spangled skirt and a determined attitude. (It's worth noting that this was the first and only time Wonder Woman appeared in a skirt; the costume was changed to shorts when the artists realized that a skirt would prove impractical in fight sequences.) The reader learns that this amazing Amazon chose to leave her island paradise to tell the women of America that the only way to succeed in life was to be strong and to

excel without the help of men.

The earliest comics are saturated with explorations of Wonder Woman's Amazonian history and her unique superpowers, but these particulars were never emphasized as the key to Wonder Woman's success. Where male superheroes such as Superman and Spiderman are revered for their incredible strength and X-ray vision, their mild-mannered alter egos serve as foils to their super selves: Not only do their aliases hinder them in the “real world,” these personas are ultimately identified with the pale, shadow selves of the populace at large, making it clear to the reader that no amount of pumping iron or fancy cars could ever transform him into his male hero. Wonder Woman and her alter ego, Diana Prince, are a different story. Whether she's in her starry panties or a smart suit, Wonder Woman/Diana encouraged the women she met to realize that while their talents and hard work were important, a positive attitude and confidence in oneself was what really got the job done. Stories like “The Five Tasks of Thomas Tighe!” (*Wonder Woman* no. 38, November–December 1949), in which our heroine is challenged by the titular arch-sexist to a series of physical challenges, finds Wonder Woman not saving the day, but rather encouraging other women to prove their strength to themselves and to patronizing men.

A secondary but no less potent theme in the comics was that of bondage. Marston felt that showing characters restrained by ropes and chains, rather than killed or maimed, cut down on the violence he found so abhorrent in other comics. Indeed, those who were roped or chained in the comic rarely protested, and some even asked to be confined, often as a way of proving their strength or forcing someone to tell the truth. But as a researcher of submissive/dominant behaviors, Marston wasn't ignorant of the fact that bondage was also sexually stimulating for some people; in a letter to Gaines on February 20, 1943, he noted:

Sadism consists in [sic] the enjoyment of other people's actual suffering.... Since binding and chaining are the one harmless, painless way of subjecting the heroine to menace and making drama of it, I have developed elaborate ways of having Wonder Woman and other characters confined.

Though Marston initially conceived Wonder Woman as an antidote to men's mistakes, the most challenging forces faced by the superheroine were often not male villains, but fierce and clever females. Uniformly sexy and downtrodden, these she-villains are portrayed as prisoners of a male perspective who don't believe that women are natural psychological and physical leaders, and who are thus punished for their male identification. By the end of their stories, they are inevitably rescued by Wonder Woman and her band of female friends, and the resulting scenes of female bonding teem with sexual tension.

Take the erotic dynamic between Wonder Woman and Marva Psycho, wife of the evil Dr. Psycho. Whether Wonder Woman is encouraging Marva to be strong and unafraid or trying to stop Marva from helping Dr. Psycho, the sub/dom vibe is surely meant to titillate. Marva is often pictured being

as submissive. Scenes like these speak to a social reality of feminine comfort and friendship in the '40s, when men were off at war and women bonded in the workplace and at home, but they also mirror the fantasy island, a literal no-man's-land, from whence our heroine came.

The Sapphic undertones that permeate Wonder Woman's relationships with foes, damsels in distress, and friends have often been overlooked by comic critics and feminists alike. Her almost exclusively female relationships have been explained away by her absentee boyfriend Steve Trevor, an army captain so uninteresting he's been killed off several times in various Wonder Woman comic runs. This heterosexual identification allows Wonder Woman to be seen enjoying the company of women without comment, whether she is rescuing them or tying them up. There's a clear frisson of erotic partnership, for example, in scenes between Wonder Woman and Etta Candy, a chubby, sassy girl who loves to dominate people and tell them what to do, as well as with the young Amazons of Paradise Island, who bind Wonder Woman with ropes and chains. An advertisement in July 1944's *Sensation Comics* no. 31 has Etta taking Wonder Woman over her knee and paddling her with a hairbrush. Wonder

them action sans chains and more respectable garb for the "scantly clad" superheroine. M.C. Gaines himself often argued with Marston about the amount of bondage in the comic; although he attempted to clean up the storyboards, those ropes and chains always managed to resurface.

Still, none of this controversy seemed to dampen Wonder Woman's popularity, and she and her cohorts, like their male superhero counterparts, became a lasting symbol of American willpower and hope. But the superheroine's feminist, homosocial world is in many ways shortsighted. Instead of advocating for human equality, Wonder Woman tends toward a feminism that sees women (more specifically, Caucasian women) as superior beings. Even as the comic—which began in wartime with horribly racist portrayals of German and Japanese soliders—grew into more sensitive portrayals of different races, ethnicities, and genders, its progressive feminist and sexual themes became a bit muddled. After Marston's death in 1947, Wonder Woman comics became more concerned with romance and marriage than equality and freedom. DC bought out *Sensation Comics* in 1952, but *Wonder Woman* never went out of print, and the title continued to make a splash until the publication

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captured, liberated, and comforted by Wonder Woman. One panel in "The Battle for Womanhood" (*Wonder Woman* no. 5, June–July 1943) even shows Marva reclining on Wonder Woman's lap, her arms around the spangled one's neck as they gaze into each other's eyes. Elsewhere, the dynamics are reversed, with Marva in the dominant position and Wonder Woman acting

Woman gives us a wink from her captive position, letting us know she's really having a good time.

Not surprisingly, many people took exception to Wonder Woman's sexually charged portrayals of female superiority. In the 1940s, Josette Frank, of the Child Study Association of America in New York, was outspoken in her criticism and advocated drastic changes—among

of the book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. The tome, a crusade against comics, was written by Dr. Fredric Wertham, who felt that Wonder Woman was a "cruel, phallic woman" and that her stories were extremely dangerous to all those who read them. Wertham specifically denounced Wonder Woman as a threat to young women, who would read her comic and

believe that feminine independence and strength were socially acceptable:

The Lesbian counterpart of Batman may be found in...Wonder Woman. The homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable. The *Psychiatric Quarterly* deplored in an editorial the "appearance of an eminent child therapist as the implied endorser of a series...which portrays extremely sadistic hatred of all males in a framework which is plainly Lesbian."

Wertham's reading of the lesbian undercurrents and the proliferation of bondage scenes in Wonder Woman had such an impact that the Comics Code Authority was formed to enforce the strictest censorship the world of comics would ever know. For the next 20 years, no hint of the "morbid ideals" of female independence and strength or nonheteronormative sexuality was seen in Wonder Woman (or any other comic-book character).

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Instead of the strong, self-sufficient woman Marston had conjured, the new Wonder Woman was a caricature, a weak figure with no personality or wit. Denied her erotic and feminist history, she became a virginal, domesticated figure whose goal of fighting injustice was abandoned for marriage and shopping. In the September–October 1968 issue of *Wonder Woman*, Diana Prince is stripped of her superpowers to become a mortal woman. One

glance at the cover's embellished print and fashionably mod Diana—shown painting a large X over an old *Wonder Woman* comic-book cover—says everything about the story that awaits readers inside: a veritable cacophony of hatboxes, shoes, and fashionable outfits. The most important thing about this Wonder Woman, it seemed, was the way she looked.

If losing her powers wasn't enough, in the mid-'70s Wonder Woman endured numerous trials in order to convince the Justice League of America (the band of otherwise male superheroes that included Batman, Aquaman, and Superman) that she was worthy to fight alongside them. After she proved herself by winning battles unaided by superpowers, she was allowed to rejoin—a bitter victory for those who knew the Amazonian heroine of the 1940s.

Things started looking up for Wonder Woman when *Ms.* magazine put her on their first cover in 1972, declaring her the forgotten champion of women's rights. While Gloria Steinem and company were able to reclaim Wonder

of her original persona. (Some 1980s portrayals attempted to revisit her feminist roots, but all these efforts, most notably that of George Pérez, who created his Wonder Woman with the input of Steinem, simply fell flat.)

While Wonder Woman's descent into mediocrity is sad enough, even more troubling is the way that her image, whether it be a panel from the original comic or a studio still of a lariat-swinging Lynda Carter, is readily adopted by people who probably don't realize how groundbreaking the original Wonder Woman truly was. The story of her early years, of her feminist, bondage-happy self, needs to be told. My hopes are pinned on Joss Whedon's *Wonder Woman* movie, which is currently in production and scheduled to come out next year. And while Whedon—the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, featuring some of the best feminist characters to date—is more than qualified to produce a Wonder Woman we can all get excited about, the re-creation of the character yet again raises another interesting question: Why is it that only men can create a feminist Wonder Woman (or any Wonder Woman at all, for that matter)? Is it because of the enduring lack of women in the boys' club of comic books? Or is it due to lack of interest? In a world that rarely embraces even real-life feminist heroes, is there any room for Wonder Woman?

One thing's for sure: We need someone to advocate for the interests of strong women who are independent, sexy, and smart. This crime-fighting, woman-loving Amazon just might be the person for the job.

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Woman's feminist origins for the realm of popular culture and consciousness, the themes of sexuality, implied homosexuality, and bondage were completely absent from their discussions. Wonder Woman was once again subsumed into the more socially acceptable role of sex symbol by the immensely popular TV series. Since then, Wonder Woman has gone through another character overhaul in comics, but none of her portrayals have rediscovered the depth