

Reconfiguring Gender and Genre in *Wonder Woman*

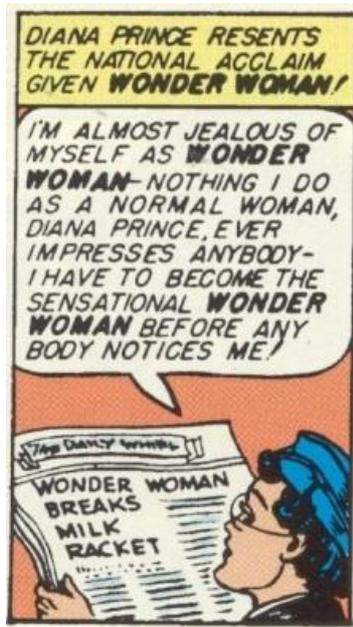
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In *Wonder Woman* (2017), Diana Prince/Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) travels to the ‘world of men’. Extra-textually, the film itself enters another world of men: the contemporary superhero blockbuster. Central to *Wonder Woman*’s achievements are the challenges it mounts to the masculinist schemas that govern both of these worlds. The World War I period setting allows many obvious jabs at the now-patently absurd inequalities of the past, while the film tackles sexism that persists in 21st century popular culture with equal force. This second line of attack is mounted from within. As Claire Johnston argues in her incisive essay ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’ (1973), Hollywood cinema can provide a powerful space for interrogating sexist ideology not despite, but because, its iconography is inherently implicated in the objectification of women. Through repeated use this iconography mythologises, and thus presents as natural, gendered stereotypes. For example, in film after film characters like Lois Lane, Mary Jane Watson and Rachel Dawes provide love interests for male superheroes (Superman, Spider-Man and Batman, respectively) and kidnap victims for supervillains, perpetuating the idea that women are prizes to be fought for by men, who control and protect society. Yet as Johnston argues, ‘it is possible to use icons, (i.e. conventional configurations) in the face of and against the mythology usually associated with them’. Because of the familiarity of Hollywood’s iconography and conventions, and audiences’ awareness of these belonging to a cinematic language, they can be reconfigured to lay bare their underpinning ideas. *Wonder Woman* director Patty Jenkins harnesses her fluency in Hollywood cinema to this effect, reworking superhero conventions to resituate female characters as heroic, active agents and contribute to more fluid understandings of gender in popular culture.



Since the character’s earliest comic book adventures, *Wonder Woman* texts have been concerned with reconfiguring masculinised tropes. Three years after the introduction of Superman, Wonder Woman debuted in *All Star Comics* #8 (1941), created by writer William Moulton Marston and artist Harry G. Peter (both continued to work on all *Wonder Woman* comic book stories until 1948). Wonder Woman joined the ranks of other popular superheroes who borrowed and modified elements of Superman, such as Batman and Captain Marvel. Whereas these other characters tweaked the archetypal superhero’s powers or altered narrative tone, Wonder Woman’s most significant interventions reworked gendered formations.

The respective central love triangles of the original comics provide a small but striking example. In early *Superman* stories, Clark Kent's meekness is repeatedly disparaged by Lois Lane, who swoons over Superman's physical strength and assertiveness. Clark is emasculated through unfavourable comparison to his superhero identity Superman, the exemplar of strong masculinity. Early *Wonder Woman* stories feature a comparable dynamic. Typically described as 'demure', Diana Prince, Wonder Woman's civilian identity, seeks the affections of Steve Trevor, who is too preoccupied fawning over Wonder Woman to notice. Of course, Wonder Woman is the one who time and again uses her physical abilities to save Steve, but Diana's investigative endeavours are also often vital to identifying and apprehending villains, while both identities exude the same unwavering compassion. *Superman* stories often end with characters praising Superman in Clark's presence, Clark's performance of meekness successfully blinding all to his concealed strength. The earliest *Wonder Woman* stories redeploy this gag with a twist. Periphery male characters praise Steve's efforts but he protests, insisting that Wonder Woman did all the work, while Diana is left annoyed that Steve fails to



acknowledge her efforts. This doubly misplaced appreciation in the first instance ignores the achievements of the female lead altogether, and in the second only values the physical strength that Wonder Woman exhibits, overlooking her and Diana's conventionally feminine qualities. While the joke in *Superman* is that Clark's emasculation is so utterly incompatible with Superman's strength that he never arouses suspicion, the *Wonder Woman* stories end with Diana frustrated that qualities culturally constructed as feminine are not valued alongside masculine ones. This is exemplified in *Sensation Comics* #7 (1942), which ends with the national papers for once celebrating Wonder Woman's victory, yet giving no mention to Diana's significant contribution. Diana succinctly expresses exasperation at the neglect of the feminine when she exclaims, upon reading the paper, "nothing I do as a normal woman, Diana Prince, ever impresses anybody - I have to become the sensational Wonder Woman before any body [sic] notices me!"

The *Wonder Women* film opts for a different approach, removing the dual identity trope to deny Steve (Chris Pine) and other characters the option of separating Diana and Wonder Woman's traits. Her compassion and strength are shown to both be vital elements of heroism. One scene that communicates this unification again uses *Superman* as a jumping off point, this time reworking a scene from *Superman: The Movie* (1978) in which a gunman holds up Lois (Margot Kidder) and Clark (Christopher Reeve). Clark pretends to faint so that he can fall in front of Lois and catch a bullet, thus saving Lois while upholding the separation of his mild-mannered reporter and courageous superhero identities. When Diana/Wonder Woman and Steve are confronted by a group of gunmen, she reaches in front of her loved one to protect him from a bullet (which she deflects and he catches, leaving him clutching the bullet like Clark, but

without having stopped it himself). Rather than having to maintain a pretence of vulnerability, Diana/Wonder Woman continues to deflect an oncoming onslaught of bullets with her bracelets. Wonder Woman's bracelets, a key part of her costume and weaponry, exemplify how her approach to superheroics is not simply based on aggression, but is focused on defence. In an iconic stance that has resonated throughout many incarnations, Wonder Woman crosses her arms in front of her face to form a shield. The first time she adopts this stance in the film, when training in Themyscira, is also the first instance in which her divine powers manifest, underscoring that her power is rooted in her desire to prevent, not stoke, violence. Thus, even when she is fighting, Diana/Wonder Woman's combination of compassion and physical strength, of conventionally feminine and masculine traits, is foregrounded and celebrated.



This idea of compassion and physical strength entwining to make a superhero who is superior to those who only possess the latter, such as *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice's* (2016) eponymous embodiments of aggressive masculinity, is rooted in Marston's ethos. Noah Berlatsky has analysed the ways in which psychologist-cum-comics creator Marston's psychological theories, particularly his conviction that a utopian society would be based on loving, strong women inducing others into submission, are expressed in his *Wonder Woman* stories (2015). While subsequent *Wonder Woman* creators distanced the stories from Marston's views on dominance and submission, which were interlaced with eroticism, the less controversial binding of conventionally masculine and feminine qualities in the Wonder Woman character has remained.

A common way this combination is articulated reveals another important distinction from her male counterparts. From Superman's very first comic his powers were frequently demonstrated through comparisons to the accomplishments of modernity, subsequently becoming introduced in many incarnations as "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!". Wonder Woman's reference points are very different, being described in early comics as possessing "the beauty of Aphrodite, the Wisdom of Athena, the strength of Hercules and the speed of Mercury". Although removed from the modern technologies claimed by the male superhero, Wonder Woman's alignment with figures of both sexes from Greek and Roman mythology attributes to her a mixture of conventionally masculine *and* feminine-coded qualities. The opening page of *Wonder Woman #1* (1942) clearly demarcates the balance of these qualities. One of the figures whose powers Wonder Woman possesses is in each corner. Aphrodite and Athena are at the top, Hercules and Mercury at the bottom, thus reflecting the ordering in the worded description and mapping out the hierarchy, which the women sit atop. Meanwhile, Wonder Woman is not neatly situated in the

middle, but is placed nearer Aphrodite and Athena, again suggesting the primacy of the goddesses and superiority of the feminine in Wonder Woman.¹



While the male superhero's association with modernity extends into a synonymy with the city (Superman and Metropolis, Batman and Gotham, Spider-Man and New York, etc.), Wonder Woman's association with myth is complemented by a bond with nature. Her home terrain is the hidden island of Themyscira (renamed from Paradise Island in the 1987 comic book relaunch). Themyscira is typically presented as a wonderland rich in natural beauty, replete with trees and flowing waterfalls.² While reflective of Aphrodite's beauty, this environment also provides a training ground in which the Amazons hone their Herculean strength. The film's realisation of Themyscira counterpoints luscious vegetation against ravines filled with jagged rocks. The passage of time is inscribed into the environment, with statues corroding and foliage spreading, yet the persistent contrast of leaf and stone shows that the former cannot overwhelm the latter. It is a landscape that gives plentifully while demanding strength of body, this

¹ Carolynocca notes that from *Sensation Comics* #17 and *Wonder Woman* #5 (both 1943) onward, Wonder Woman's introduction was amended to "beautiful *as* Aphrodite, wise *as* Athena, stronger *than* Hercules, and swifter *than* Mercury," leaving no doubt as to her equality with the female gods and supremacy over the male gods' (Cocca's italics). This significant modification further refines the hierarchy of gendered qualities.

² Rare exceptions to this rule exist, such as in the 2011 TV pilot *Wonder Woman*, in which Themyscira is a corporation and Diana/Wonder Woman (Adrienne Palicki) the CEO, seemingly to be in keeping with the most popular and most capitalist screen superheroes at the time, Batman and Iron Man. The failure of this pilot to sell the series affirms Wonder Woman's association with nature rather than the urban.

depiction conveying that nature and the women with whom it is aligned are not passive but resilient.



Themyscira's rich greens and blues provide a stark contrast to the dank shades of the film's 'world of men', which is largely consistent with the overriding colour scheme of the DC Extended cinematic universe (as set by the muted palette of *Man of Steel* [2013] and *Batman v Superman*). Washed-out greys characterise the universe's masculinised aesthetic, which rejects the vibrancy of Golden and Silver Age Comics in favour of the dourness that typifies 1980s superhero comics. The contrast is made strikingly apparent in *Wonder Woman* when the camera drifts through the invisible wall that conceals Themyscira from the surrounding world, the resplendent hues shifting into a dark and foreboding seascape. However, the continuous motion of the camera in this unbroken (if digitally constructed) take conveys the sense that Themyscira, and the values it embodies, are not separated from the rest of the DCEU. Subsequently, when *Wonder Woman* ventures out of Themyscira and into the surrounding dankness (upon arriving at London she exclaims "it's so ugly"), she carries the paradisiacal island's values with her and begins to suffuse these throughout the world of men.

The masculinised aesthetic of the 'Dark Age' comic books in which previous DCEU films are most firmly anchored comprises not just muted colours but also, as Carolynocca explains, 'very particular and very binary representations of gender: hypermuscular men and hypersexualized women'. These representations intensify the imbalance between male and female characters found in previous eras of superhero comics. Although DCEU films are far from the only contemporary superhero blockbusters guilty of exhibiting this binary, it is decidedly pronounced when you place the sculpted, bulging muscles of Ben Affleck's full-body Batman outfit alongside the micro shorts and t-shirt combo that Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn wriggles into whilst ogled by *Suicide Squad's* (2016) camera.

Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* resists these seemingly engrained representations. The Amazons that populate Themyscira are of a range of different body types, races and ages, dismantling hegemonic ideas of the ideal woman that too often provide the template for female action

heroes. The Amazons are not defined by their physical beauty; rather, this is interlinked with their strength and sisterhood. Far from being a fixed category and object of the scopophilic gaze, femininity is thus presented as rich and fluid, and embodied by a society of subjects with whom the audience is invited to identify. Indeed, by opening with a sustained depiction of Diana's upbringing, the film aligns its audience with the Amazons while making Steve and his German pursuers the strange invaders. Diana/Wonder Woman remains the main subject in the world of men even when donning her unnecessarily-revealing superhero costume (at one point she mistakes a corset for armour and scoffs at its impracticality, apparently oblivious that her own armour only covers half of her body), and never suffers anything remotely comparable to the leering shots that framed Harley Quinn.

While refusing to objectify female characters, the film does partake to some degree in a trope of superhero cinema in which scenes are contrived to showcase the musculature of male stars. Moments that exhibit the bodies of Hugh Jackman as Wolverine, Chris Hemsworth as Thor, Henry Cavill as Superman, or any star from Hollywood's growing list of leading men whose hypermasculine physiques preclude them from convincing as everymen, can serve multiple functions. For instance, they assert the performers' physical labour in a genre frequently reprimanded for an over-reliance on insubstantial computer-generated imagery. Displays of the male form that foreground physical exertion also continue the cinematic traditions of 'Masculinity as Spectacle' discussed by Steve Neale in his 1983 article of the same name. Neale argues that eroticism is disavowed through strategies like placing the body in violent peril that resists erotic contemplation. Yet, as Neale suggests, such efforts to repel the erotic gaze reveal its potential presence. Indeed, images of ripped male physiques in superhero films arguably often cater to the erotic gaze, potentially to reach beyond the genre's traditionally male viewership. Liam Burke's 2015 audience research at cinema screenings of superhero films provides empirical evidence of fans expecting this pleasure; quotes from female attendees of *Thor* (2011) include the gems 'I want to see sexy man meat' and 'I just came for the hottie'.

The scene in *Wonder Woman* in which Diana walks in just as Steve emerges naked from a pool plays mischievously with the exhibition of the male body. It is one of many instances in the film when Gadot's facial expressions are wonderfully enigmatic, disclosing intrigue while concealing its exact nature. A slight smile indicates that Diana is aware of the function of Steve's penis (we later learn that she knows all about the "pleasures of the flesh", having read all twelve volumes of Cleo's treatises on body and pleasure). Importantly, while Diana may be sexually interested in Steve she does not sexualise him. It is cinematic and social convention that underscore the sensuality of Pine's exposed body. The camera lingers on mid and long shots of Steve, ensuring that the performer's musculature is showcased. Pine brilliantly communicates Steve's anguished masculinity, attempting to perform machismo and convince Diana that he is an above-average specimen of manliness, while squirming vulnerably. Diana expresses fascination over all that is new to her eyes: not just Steve's body but also his watch. Yet Gadot's performance and writer Allan Heinberg's dialogue very much leave open the possibility that Diana is aroused and seeks, in a somewhat teasing move, to transpose these feelings into discussion of the watch, thus being fully aware of the double entendre when she remarks in bemusement "you let that little thing tell you what to do?" What is certain in this scene is that Jenkins, Heinberg, Gadot and Pine conspire to upset the codes through which bodies are objectified in cinema. The scene acknowledges eroticism while not simply sexualising Pine, knowingly displacing object status onto an actual mechanical object.

The film's blending of gendered tropes is another strategy that evidences its commitment to subverting conventional gender representations. The sequence in which Steve and Etta Candy

(Lucy Davis) take Diana shopping for a civilian outfit provides a prime example. In this sequence, the staple montage from superhero origin stories in which the protagonist designs their vigilante costume collides with the makeover montage most commonly found in teen movies and romantic comedies. The former is typically understood as presenting the construction of an image that exudes heroism while maintaining anonymity, the latter the construction of a beautiful (and more conventionally feminine) identity that negates the old drab self. Even from these short descriptions, overlaps are apparent; both tropes concern forging a confident and striking identity that is unrecognisable from the existing one. The sequence in *Wonder Woman* ingeniously reveals these links by intermingling while inverting both tropes, seemingly undertaking a *deconstruction* of heroism and beauty. Yet the filmmakers make clear that, in actuality, these qualities are not lost when Diana dresses as an unassuming civilian. For example, once Diana settles on a trim black outfit closely resembling the one that fails to attract Steve's eye in the Marston/Peter comics, Etta scoffs at the idea that completing the look with a pair of glasses fully conceals Diana's beauty. This comment, and the accompanying image of an elegant, bespectacled Diana, niftily exposes a fallacy perpetuated by many superhero narratives (as well as romantic comedies) that the glasses-and-hair-worn-up look suppresses a woman's beauty.



The shopping sequence uproots other limiting understandings of femininity, particularly the attribution of vanity as intrinsically feminine. Certain *Wonder Woman* texts themselves have been guilty of upholding this association. A panel from *Sensation Comics* #15 (1943) reveals how this notion dovetails with the aforementioned concept of glasses as antithetical to beauty. A caption indicates that Diana yields to a 'girlish impulse' as she sits gazing into a mirror. She is composed like a pair of scales: arms held up either side of her, one hand holding her glasses and the other the looking glass, which reflects the image of her unspectacled face, adorned instead with Wonder Woman's circlet. The hand that holds the glasses is slightly lower than the other, suggesting the inferiority of its contents as she quite literally weighs up the relative beauty of her identities. This meaning is enforced by Diana/Wonder



Woman's thought balloon, in which she accepts the validity of Steve's preference of Wonder Woman over Diana. *Wonder Woman* #182 (1969), admittedly from a widely-disliked and abruptly abandoned run by writer Dennis O'Neil, who has since conceded its flaws, provides an even more pertinent counterpoint to the recent film's shopping sequence. The comic features Wonder Woman going on a shopping expedition and jubilantly demonstrating, as stated in a caption, that 'happiness, for any healthy, red-blooded young gal, is bedecking herself in the latest fashion finery'.



The shopping sequence in the film debunks this notion of fashion providing the primary source of happiness for any 'gal' as Diana tests the freedom of movement that the outfits afford, finding happiness instead in the ability to freely manoeuvre her high-kicking legs. The film's Diana/Wonder Woman values practicality over vanity and the maintenance of a socially-sanctioned image, seeing no point in an outfit that restricts her capacity to act. The strategies at work in this sequence thus show that women can be beautiful, practical and physically capable in an array of complementary ways.

Destabilising the cultural gendering of particular qualities is also prominent in the film's efforts to decouple the binding of physical strength and masculinity that underpins the superhero genre and cultural ideals of masculinity more broadly. Imagery associated with male superheroes is redeployed to present Wonder Woman and the Amazons' physical abilities as equal to their male counterparts. Iconography, from costumes to repeated actions, has always provided defining features of superheroes. We are not just told about Superman's superiority to speeding bullets, trains and tall buildings, but are repeatedly shown him racing the first two and leaping the third. From the Golden Age, *Wonder Woman* comics borrowed this iconography, her adventures replete with images of her deflecting gunshots and speeding past trains. Although she is associated with mythology and nature, the trials of Themyscira prepare Wonder Woman to easily overcome anything modernity throws at her.

In superhero cinema, it is not just striking images, but movements, that define superheroes, while cultivating generic coherence between superhero films. This phenomenon is brilliantly demonstrated in *Deadpool* (2016) when Angel Dust (Gina Carano) goes to leap down from a ship and Deadpool (Ryan Reynolds) excitedly prepares everybody for her "superhero landing". Before she provides a textbook example of this action, the deviously meta Deadpool and any audience member with a passing knowledge of superhero cinema knows that Angel Dust will land with one knee and hand to the ground, the other raised in readiness to spring into action. Some of



the most prominent familiar movements in *Wonder Woman* rework moments from *The Avengers* (2012), a film in which the lone female superhero Black Widow's (Scarlett Johansson) espionage skills and acrobatic agility contrast the immense physical strength of central male superheroes Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), Thor, Captain America (Chris Evans) and Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr). On two occasions, *Wonder Woman* recalls a moment from *The Avengers* in which Captain America uses his super-strength to launch the slender Black Widow from his shield, high into the air. During the beach battle on Themyscira, no man is required to perform this move as a fellow Amazon launches Antiope (Robin Wright) from her shield. Later in the film, it takes a group of men to provide the thrust needed to boost Wonder Woman's already-super leap. Elsewhere, *Wonder Woman* exhibits comparable abilities to the most hypermasculine of all Marvel's Avengers, Hulk, as she leaps onto and clings to walls, making her own handholds through digging her fingers into stone or brick before launching off. These instances do not simply resituate conventionally masculine qualities as feminine, but reveal the compatibility of these qualities with ones typically deemed feminine. The Amazonian shield launch is also a potent expression of sisterhood, while *Wonder Woman*'s physical exertions are driven by her deep compassion for the world of men, occurring in scenes in which she strives to rid this world of oppression.

An important point that has emerged from the above analysis is that Jenkins' *Wonder Woman*'s subversions of gendered iconography and conventions that have ingrained themselves into the superhero genre are not isolated efforts, but partake in an ongoing process of negotiation. *Wonder Woman* texts have often proved central forces for destabilising hegemonic depictions of gender in the superhero genre, while shifts in style and tone throughout the genre's history, encompassing everything from dark and sombre musings to camp extravagance, always have gendered connotations. Meanwhile, *Wonder Woman* texts themselves are not immune to restrictive perceptions of gender, and in some cases the film challenges ideas that certain previous *Wonder Woman* stories have perpetuated. Although constructions of gender in *Wonder Woman* texts, the superhero genre and Hollywood cinema will always possess the capacity for malleability, in the last few decades superhero cinema has been mostly reinforcing, rather than rethinking, the gendered ideas at its foundations. By reconstructing these foundations using the existing materials, *Wonder Woman* has given not just the DCEU, but superhero cinema more broadly, a much-needed remodelling - the potential for which was there all along.

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