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Sculpted from clay, shaped by power: Feminine narrative and agency in Wonder Woman

Mikala Carpenter

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Sculpted from Clay, Shaped by Power:
Feminine Narrative and Agency in *Wonder Woman*

by

Mikala Carpenter

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature
Eastern Michigan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Children’s Literature

Thesis Committee:
Annette Wannamaker, PhD, Chair
Amanda Allen, PhD, Second Reader

15 March 2018
Ypsilanti, Michigan
To the wonder women in my life who have loved me,

who have challenged me, who have made me

stronger, brighter, better.
Acknowledgments

In Wonder Woman Vol. 4 #40 (2015), Diana declares, “An Amazon looks for ways to empower her sisters … because their strength is hers.” The creation of this thesis project has only been accomplished with the same tenet in mind. By recognizing and following the strengths of others, I have discovered my own and can now empower those who come after me. The support I’ve received throughout the process of this project has been invaluable and much appreciated.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis readers, Annette Wannamaker and Amanda Allen, and the children’s literature department faculty at Eastern Michigan University, including Ian Wojcik-Andrews and Ramona Caponegro. Annette and Amanda, I appreciate the time you have both spent with my work and my writing beyond words can express.

Above all, I would like to thank my family and friends for their undying confidence and inspiration. Thank you to my parents for the pester, the confidence boosts, the honesty, and the love even in my worst moments. Thank you to my sister for check-in texts and my brother for fact-checking my Batman references and debating comics with me. Thank you to my #ladies for your ever-present strength: Erika, who inspired me to follow my ever-loving heart; Teresa, who is better at texting than me and to whom I owe a title; and Caitlin, who brought me to see Wonder Woman’s silver-screen debut and has gamely watched Wonder Woman with me too many times. Thank you to my many coworkers at Barnes and Noble Booksellers who helped me (and my caffeine intake) through the stress, busy weekends, and tuition fees. Thank you to my children’s literature cohort for pushing me to my limits and always teaching me new things.

In each of your strengths, I have found my own and I love you and this project for what I have discovered in theorizing a narrative to empower all those who seek a heroine.
Abstract

By applying deconstructive and feminist theories to the *Wonder Woman* saga, this thesis develops a potential definition of feminine narrative in contrast to the normative and exclusionary patriarchal narrative that reigns supreme in popular culture and Western ideology. Though much of comics discourse functions on the assumption that superhero narratives are homogenous reflections of this ideological hero narrative, I posit that the Amazonian princess’s resilience and iconicity stem from her own narrative’s uniquely deconstructive nature: Where the patriarchal story would demand dominance, destruction, and violence, the feminine narrative that Diana models advocates for equality, nurturance, and emotional and rational communication. By examining the historical and literary texts that influenced her as well as her own influences on popular culture, this thesis shows Wonder Woman counteracting the patriarchal hero narrative and its binaries in favor of a more equalizing and nurturing feminine narrative that serves to empower herself and her readers.
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The saga of *Wonder Woman* has, over the last 75 years, been relaunched four times since its first release, resulting in five different series and storylines with different numbering systems. Early *Wonder Woman* releases such as its *All Star Comics* debut and *Sensation Comics* trial run are listed under the corresponding titles. The relaunches are denoted in academic and popular criticism by volume numbers, whose chronological order and corresponding issues and dates can be seen below. It should be noted that this list does not include elseworlds, Justice League of America, or other miscellaneous titles as they will not be cited in this work.

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Throughout this work, titles will be cited as follows: Vol. # Issue # (Year of release). For example, the first official *Wonder Woman* comic by William Moulton Marston would be denoted as Vol. 1 #1 (1942). No page numbers will be cited as comics are formatted without any page numbers. I have chosen to make reference to a particular example’s creator only when the writer or artist’s identity and therefore style are of consequence to the argument at hand. All works can be found in the bibliography listed under the relevant writer or artist’s name.

Quotations from the above volumes will be recorded in this work as they appear in the original text. All uses of italics and stilted en-dashes (---) in these quotes are original and not my emphasis.
Introduction

A little more than 75 years ago, in the fall of 1941, a future cultural icon hit the newsstands in *All Star Comics* #8. She wasn’t meant for success or longevity: She wasn’t the first superhero to capture the imaginations of the American public—Superman had debuted in 1938 in *Action Comics* #1 and Batman in 1939 in *Action Comics* #27—nor was she the first super-female to grace the pages of comic books—Olga Mesmer, Girl with the X-Ray Eyes (Tate 147), and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle (Lepore 178), both appeared in 1938, the same year as Superman; Invisible Scarlet O’Neil (Tate 147) and Amazona the Mighty Woman (Lepore 179-180) both had brief stints in 1940. In fact, when presented to Charles Gaines, her first editor, it was obvious he didn’t expect her to make it. In a note to her creator, Gaines wrote: “After six months’ publication we’ll submit your woman hero to a vote for our comics readers. If they don’t like her I can’t do any more about it” (qtd. 188). Despite doubts and a precedence for short-lived superhero comics, the most prolific female American icon graced *All Star Comics* covers across the country: Wonder Woman was born.

By the spring of 1944, *Wonder Woman* comics had an insatiable ten million readers (246). To this day, she remains the most recognizable superheroine across all comics publishing imprints. How and why was Wonder Woman the first—and arguably only—popularly successful superheroine in comic books? The journalist Michael Harrington suggests that her instant popularity was due to her “breathtaking fusion of feminism and patriotism and kinky sex” (9 qtd. Inness 144). While most critics, such as 1950s anti-comics advocate Frederic Wertham, want to focus on her well-endowed (*their* term, not mine) sexiness, it was her feminism that inspired her creator, polyamorous psychologist William Moulton Marston. For Marston, his creation was a different kind of fusion: He aimed to dream up “a feminine character with all the strength of a
Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman” (qtd. Lepore 187). It was, reportedly, his legal wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, who declared, “Come on, let’s have a Superwoman! There’s too many men out there!” (qtd. Danziger-Russell 13) and inspired the iconic Amazonian princess. From the start, Marston envisioned Wonder Woman as powerful in an identity coded as simultaneously feminine and masculine. In fact, every opening of Wonder Woman comics from 1941 to 1947 likened young Diana to mythical icons Aphrodite, Athena, Hercules, and Mercury, effectively tying her to the strengths of both the female and the male. In this way, Wonder Woman stands out among a sparse legion of superheroines as one who functions across a feminine/masculine spectrum of gender identity and narrative.

More often than not, however, in academic and critical texts dedicated entirely to the study of comics and superheroes, Wonder Woman is lost, ignored, buried. In Chris Gavaler’s piece on the search for the ur-heroes of human culture, On the Origin of Superheroes, Wonder Woman and superhero(ine)ism are erased from the narrative entirely. (The only women Gavaler mentions are the male superheroes’ romantic interests.) Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan’s The Power of Comics similarly slights Wonder Woman. The University of Florida Library’s 2004 exhibit, “Help is on the Way! Comic Books and Superheroes in Special Collections,” does not feature Wonder Woman individually, but instead folds her silently in the super-group narratives of the Justice Society and the Justice League of America. Even in a book titled The Secret History of Wonder Woman, the eponymous superheroine comes second to the narrative of her domineering male author. In much the same way that “the position of women in comics today is still as unequal and inferior to the representations of men within the same medium” (Whaley and Wigard 203), so too is the state of academic criticism on Wonder Woman—and other super women—as well.
Even when academic work is not cutting Wonder Woman from the superhero narrative, she is often lauded as empowered but problematic. Wonder Woman, after all, is a troubling enigma of womanhood, heroism, and agency—not all of which are always interpreted in positive ways. As the first nationally recognized superheroine in the 1940s, she acted, as Katherine E. Whaley and Justin Wigard suggest, “as a progenitor for female superheroes” (201). The term “progenitor” used here suggests two culturally iconic female characters who represent a well-worn cultural dichotomy: Eve and the Virgin Mary, two mother figures in the Judeo-Christian pantheon who represent the negative and the positive of womanhood, respectively. Eve is most often interpreted as the begetter of the human race, but also originator of sin, while the Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus, son of God, as well as ultimate feminine. In much the same way, Wonder Woman is set up as “a champion for female superheroes” at the same time she features as “a fantasy for men” (201); she is buff and violent, but she is often partially nude; she is female progenitor—Zechowski and Neumann even figure her as “Mother of All Superheroes”—as well as unachievable feminine ideal. As the first recognized superheroine, she is expected to represent all female superheroes but disdained for being raised on an iconic pedestal.

First and foremost, Wonder Woman has been most often ridiculed for her ineffective or negative influence on female representation in graphic novels and popular media in general. Most critics are especially concerned that she seems to cater visually and physically to a sexually-oriented male gaze. For much of her history, Diana has been known for her outfits that leave her partially nude—inciting young boys to cry, “I don’t like her! She wears her underpants on the outside!”—and the Amazonian cultural tendencies toward bondage (her greatest tool is her

1 Overheard at Barnes and Noble Booksellers, Ann Arbor.
Lasso of Compulsion/Truth). Though she is, in some instances, portrayed as significantly muscular and strong, popular media interests still demand that “physically strong and very aggressive women” like Wonder Woman must be “balanced’ as sexy (e.g., an emphasis on their breasts and nudity)” (Tate 155). That is to say, those hegemonic attributes—strength, empowerment, violence—that others deem overly masculine must be “balanced,” as Tate suggests, with beauty, grace, and, starting in the 1990s, Bad Girl sexiness. These “tough girl” characters are often made to either defer to men in romantic or authoritative relationships—as Wonder Woman endured for much of the 1950s as writers tried to force her to submit to Steve Trevor’s relentless proposals—or die horrible, traumatic deaths to reinstate patriarchal order. In this way, many critics argue that Wonder Woman sets a precedent for superheroines to be, as Sherrie Inness suggests, “little more than overly endowed male fantasies” (142) and, therefore, disempowered female characters.

Similarly, another critique of both the Amazonian warrior and superhero comics in general has been the genre’s and characters’ negative influences on American child readers. The first outspoken opponent of comic books, Sterling North, was a literary critic for the Chicago Daily News and wrote in May 1940 that, after examining 108 comics available on newsstands at the time, “at least 70% of them contained material that no respectable newspaper would think of accepting” (Nyberg 3-4 qtd. Danziger-Russell 9). Next, Frederic Wertham, known for his 1954 book Seduction of the Innocent and his testimony for harsh graphic novel censorship, went after superhero comics in particular. He insisted the genre’s portrayal of violence had a direct correlation with increased juvenile delinquency in the United States and “queer” characters confused and negatively affected young readers. Wertham was, in particular, not a fan of Wonder Woman: “For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image…. For girls she is a morbid
ideal. Where Batman is anti-feminine, the attractive Wonder Woman and her counterparts are definitely anti-masculine” (193). According to Wertham, then, Diana and the Amazons are poor models of ideologically-constructed femininity for boys and girls alike. Following the publication of Seduction of the Innocent, the Comics Code Authority was established and functioned to self-censor all comic books published thereafter. DC came down hard on Wonder Woman in particular and, by the 1960s and 1970s, had removed her strength and powers and upped her heteronormative sexuality to the max.

As seen here in North and Wertham’s bombastic critiques, the genres of comic books and graphic novels—in which superheroes like Wonder Woman most often find their niche—have consistently been ridiculed and devalued. Literary critic William Anthony Nericcio categorized comics as “inferior products for the post-drool, pre-shaving set” (83), an infantilizing and masculine-coded jibe, while Jerry Griswold fears association with comics studies will lead children’s literature studies to “forget The Odyssey and lose scholarly face” (qtd. Kidd 149-150).

Since the 1966 Batman television series, its eponymous character and other unrelated heroes and comics have been associated with “kitsch” and tacky “low” brow entertainment; it would take Christopher Nolan’s 2005 Batman Begins with its serious and brooding contemporary themes to put superheroes back on the general public’s radar.

The question stands: Why? As anthropologist Jeffrey A. Brown suggests in his analysis of comic culture and cultural capital, comics and comics readers are “necessarily looked down upon by the greater society because” both “amount to a disruption of, and threat to, dominant cultural hierarchies” (18). For example, Wertham saw 1950s comics as a scapegoat to explain a sudden influx of juvenile delinquency following two World Wars and a new effervescently liberated U.S. culture rather than point to a disruption of the prior decades’ dominant cultural mores. In
contrast, Ronald Schmitt asserts that comics form a genre that most accurately reflects and
deconstructs reality: “Comic book characters reveal essential myths and ideologies of the cultures
in which they are produced, but their popularity clearly stems from the fact that they offer
alternatives to and escape from the ideology of the status quo” (154-155). Like their ancestors in
the Lascaux cave paintings (c. 15,000 BCE), Tang dynasty silk tapestries (c. 618-907 CE), and
William Hogarth’s panel-like Rake’s Progress (c. 1735), comics and graphic novels reflect in
image the immediate histories, priorities, and ideologies of their culture. In contrast to these
more accepted visual modes, however, comics “develop and thrive outside the critical, aesthetic,
and commercial criteria” (Wright Comic Book Nation xiv) of the literary status quo. Comics, then,
function in contrast to the norm and deconstruct dominant narratives by nature.

Wonder Woman’s creator, psychologist, writer, and megalomaniac William Moulton
Marston similarly recognized this power of comics. In a 1944 American Scholar article titled
“Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” Marston insisted that comics were viable forms of
entertainment, literature, and literacy:

They [comics] defy the limits of accepted fact and convention, thus amortizing to
apoplexy the ossified arteries of routine thought. But by these very tokens, the picture-
story fantasy cuts loose the hampering debris of art and artifice and touches the tender
spots of universal human desires and aspirations…. Comics speak without qualm or
sophistication, to the innermost ears of the wishful self. (n.p.)

Comics, he argued, were emotive, associative, imaginative, and, even, equalizing. Literary
scholars of the time—including Louisiana State’s Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman

2 In a mocking response also published in American Scholar, Brooks and Heilman scoffed at Marston’s
idealism: “Here is no ivory tower… here the high realm of scholarship is married to daily actuality” (qtd.
heartily rejected Marston’s advocacy for comics, especially Wonder Woman, as viable and valuable research subjects. Marston, on the other hand, saw comics as a sure-fire way to instill his radical feminist ideas into literature that was, at the time, aimed at a primarily child audience: “‘Wonder Woman’ was conceived by Dr Marston to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence” (“Noted Psychologist Revealed as Author” qtd. Lepore 220). Marston seized an opportunity to reach the next generation—including his own children—and shake up the late 1940s’ and 1950s’ sexist status quo with a heroic female character. Marston also insisted his original character was a model for feminine authority and power who would appeal to young girls especially:

Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power…. Women’s strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman. (qtd. Tate 148)

He aimed to inspire a generation of girls who would, he insisted, emancipate themselves from patriarchal strictures and run the country within 1,000 years of his writing. In the mind and hands of Marston, the Wonder Woman saga had the intention of serving as a positive influence on child readers despite critiques otherwise.

If Wonder Woman’s creator’s message all along was deconstructive of a male-dominated social order, what does this say about the Amazonian princess, her narrative, and her resilient

Lepore 252). Here again we see a strict separation of “high” and “low” literature with comics squarely situated by literary critics into the latter, “lesser” category.
staying power in popular culture? Like Marston’s goal and like the comic book, Wonder Woman is, as Charles Hatfield argues in regards to comics, “a kind of last glaring example of the unassimilated and unassimilable” (365). That is to say, the Amazon princess stands as “unassimilated and unassimilable” to the normative gender politics and gender assumptions of a heavily male-dominated genre. Wonder Woman’s success and 76-year-old popularity, then, seems to have a lot to do with her rejection of culturally ideological assumptions of what it means to be a woman as well as what it means to be a hero. We’ve heard about the hero narrative—often referred to as the hero journey, courtesy of Joseph Campbell—in relation to everything from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Victorian era *bildungsroman* tales, and George Lucas’s *Star Wars* saga. All of these narratives are centered on male characters and the male point of view. But have you ever read, seen, or heard of a decidedly “female narrative”?  

Storytelling—especially drawing on both visual and textual techniques—has served as a locus of human society and civilization for centuries. Even before a recognizable alphabet had been developed, ancient peoples were painting tales of the everyday and their hero-gods on cave walls and ceilings in Lascaux (France) and Altamira (Spain) and combining pictographs with complex illustration in Ancient Egypt. Oral histories abounded among the Greeks and oral fairy tales endured throughout the centuries. Even the women kept illiterate in Early Modern Europe were able to create a history of Norman England in the Bayeux tapestry. Storytelling and narrative are, then, paramount in human experience, and these modes of visual/textual narratives continue into modern comics and function to highlight that which is valued in a given society or culture. As Joseph Campbell notes in considering mythology:

> Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature…, as a production of poetic fantasy from prehistoric times,
misunderstood by succeeding ages…; as a repository of allegorical instruction to shape the
individual to his group…; as a group dream symptomatic of depths of the human
psyche…; as the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights…; and as
God’s Revelation to His children…. Mythology is all these. (330)

The mythos and stories of humanity—a blanket statement used here only as Campbell does—
would seem to contain multitudes upon multitudes. Interpretations of myths and heroes abound
and circumvent limitations of time and space. Rarely, however, are female narratives included in
these multitudes, let alone allowed to serve as the central point of view.

According to Campbell, mythology is a conglomeration of story, morality, psychology,
and anthropological rites of passage. His work relies heavily on Jung’s interpretation of dreams
and draws some on Freud’s complexes and theories. Campbell presents his monomyth theory—
that all human stories have a basic, recognizable pattern of structures—as a universally applicable
interpretation of history and narrative. However, as critics like Joanna Russ have noted previously
(Lindow 3), this monomythic theory ignores or stereotypes women. Campbell writes from a
point of view in which it is assumed that “[m]en usually establish[] the rules, as well as symbols,
of victory” (Barron 30). Overall, Campbell’s work seems to present theories devoid of cultural or
ideological reference. In contrast, Roland Barthes suggests in his own book on mythology: “…
myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand
something, and it imposes it on us” (226). By fitting female characters into convenient boxes of
“mother,” “lover,” and “evil witch,” Campbell simultaneously ignores and endorses an imposing
ideology of male—or patriarchal—narrative.

In order to instead develop tactics for alternate stories to the male-dominated narrative,
Margery Hourihan analyzes the prolific monomyth narrative in her book Deconstructing the Hero.
The markedly Western *ur*-tale for which Campbell advocates is a story, as Hourihan asserts, “about superiority, dominance, and success” (1). The telic urge of the ideal hero as exemplified in Odysseus, Beowulf, King Arthur, Saint George, Atticus Finch, Luke Skywalker, Mad Max, Superman and others is to defend, defeat, and dominate. Often a journey into the “wilderness”—a representation of the unconscious, according to Campbell—the hero’s narrative requires its main character to depart the known world, venture into the unknown world inhabited by the Other, and return triumphant with a boon. The Other, for its unknown and unrecognizable nature, is demonized and made threatening to the hero’s people and must therefore be defeated and, often, destroyed. The hero overcomes obstacles and enemies because he is virtuous and “because he is strong, brave, resourceful, rational, and determined to succeed” (9). Action and violence are also often paramount in the hero narrative to specifically exemplify these ideal virtues. As Hourihan suggests, the hero’s ultimate mode is always-already “domination—of the environment, of his enemies, of his friends, of women, and of his own emotions, his ‘weaknesses’” (58). The hero is met at the end with success and acceptance and, sometimes, ultimate superiority as idolized hero or crowned ruler. In other words, the monomyth hero tale is the tale of, exclusively, the white heteronormative male who *dominates* and, sometimes, *destroys*.

Fundamental binaries abound in this figuration of the hero tale: *us/Them, hero/villain, good/evil, rationality/emotionality, adult/child, man/woman*. This tale of superiority, dominance, and success is ideological and inscribes the values and priorities of a given culture. As Hourihan suggests, “A consideration of what is foregrounded, what is backgrounded and what is simply omitted from these stories throws further light on the hierarchy of values which they construct” (4). What is foregrounded in the monomyth is markedly masculine: male strengths, male behaviors, and male goals infuse even the least normative narratives. The feminine is
backgrounded and only emphasized insofar as female strengths, behaviors, or goals impact the main (male) hero. This is considered a male point of view, and men and women alike are accustomed to and expect it. For example, in a precursor to Wonder Woman, Planet Comics’ “Amazona, the Mighty Woman” (1940), the main character is an uncivilized woman of “surpassing strength and unmatched beauty” (qtd. Lepore 179). This strength is ideal for men, whereas this beauty is ideal from the male point of view. She rescues and immediately falls in love with American reporter Blake Manners. When Manners whisks her away to America, Amazona becomes ferocious, defensive, and destructive, an exact replica of the heroic masculine according to monomyth. However, these are undesirable attributes in a woman in the male point of view; patriarchal America rejects Amazona in and out of the narrative and Planet Comics stopped running the comic after one appearance. The patriarchal narrative and point of view remains dominant of the hero tale even when the hero is female.

As a genre focused primarily on heroism, whose precedent is set by the ultimate male, Superman, comics should also fall into this category of male narrative. As Hourihan acknowledges, “Superman and the other superheroes are parodies of masculinity” (72). As parodies, they reflect and solidify the entrenchment of hegemonic masculinity in ideology. Though they function as allegorical, superheroes remain culturally categorized as male: Superman is savior male; Batman is antihero male; the Flash is Knight-of-the-Round-Table male; and so on. Superheroes’ narratives tend to rely on a strict good/evil binary and often involve a storyline requiring defensive, destructive, and dominating action that recalls the heroic monomyth. This

3 Think Sir Gawain: epic narrative crux character, doomed hero, complete with villain(s) functioning as both double and foil.
means that, by nature of being a (super)hero narrative, Wonder Woman’s story should be subjected to the male point of view and male dominance as well as representative female disempowerment and female erasure. If this were true, however, Wonder Woman, as I argue, would have gone the way of her predecessor Amazona, the Mighty Woman, decades ago. Instead, the saga of Wonder Woman has remained paramount in comics and fan culture for three-quarters of a century.

This project seeks to understand and highlight why Wonder Woman has succeeded in a genre characterized by high levels of testosterone and misogyny on and off the page. In order to resituate agency and power in Wonder Woman and her superheroine counterparts, this thesis will theorize and highlight the Amazon princess’s saga as a rare deconstructive feminine narrative. What, however, is a feminine narrative? In the 1970s, feminist theorist Hélène Cixous aimed to theorize just that with her concept of *l’écriture féminine*, often translated to English as “woman’s writing.” This writing would be, Cixous purported, an act in which “[w]oman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing…. Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (347). *L’écriture féminine* aimed to insert the female into literature and all texts where she had been previously excluded, banished, ignored; Cixous’s call is to “us who are omitted” (349).4 The ultimate struggle, Cixous insisted, was to stand bodily, linguistically, and narratively in opposition to the dominant systems of patriarchal ideology.

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4 As is typical of first and second wave feminism, the French feminists’ theories concerned primarily women in the biological sense. At the time there was less intersectional awareness, though a continuation of Cixous’s work today could effectively use this to empower a more inclusive “us who are omitted.”
Though Cixous did declare that “woman’s writing” does not exist, “for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded” (353) by virtue of its antithetical and oppositional nature, her concept advocates for women’s contributions to language, writing, narratology, and specific narratives. This theory “both creates and sustains alternative forms of narratives and narratological relations” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2)—as comic books and graphic novels also do—with the aim “to breakup, to destroy” (Cixous 347) the heteronormative narrative of the patriarchy instilled in Western literary narratives. The goal, then, of a feminine narrative is to deconstruct the ideological hero tale. As seen above, the male narrative is about dominance, physical violence, and, ultimately, destruction or dominance of the Other. A feminine narrative, in that case, would counter these dualistic attributes: nurturing, equalizing, creative, emotional, averse to violence and destruction, supportive and aware of the unconscious and the Other. The goal of a feminine narrative is to prompt, in Cixous’s own words, “a veritable explosion” (Makward and Cixous 26) of identity and agency in a storytelling/storied woman.

This deconstruction of the normative male narrative can, according to Cixous, only be conceived, written, and formulated by “subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (353). Though ingrained within the patriarchal system—Cixous’s “automatisms”—of literary and cultural history, Wonder Woman functions as a textual/visual challenge that simultaneously highlights and counteracts the dominant ideological system that created her. Even after decades of overwhelmingly male publishers’, writers’, artists’, and lovers’ attempt to make her personally and artistically docile, malleable, controllable, desirable, the Amazonian princess eludes these attempts at control. Like Cixous’s ideal feminine writer, Wonder Woman literally and figuratively challenges dominant systems,
whether she is advocating for fair pay and treatment of women workers, thwarting the pantheon of Greek gods, or refusing another marriage proposal.

By combining the theories of Hourihan’s deconstructive hero narrative and Cixous’s woman’s writing, this thesis aims to develop a potential definition of feminine narrative in contrast to the normative and exclusionary patriarchal hero narrative that reigns supreme in popular culture and Western ideology. Where the patriarchal story demands dominance, violence, and stone-cold reason, the model of feminine narrative that Diana’s storyline portrays advocates for equality, nurturance, and emotional and rational communication. The first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to tracing the historical, literary, and mythological influences that can be seen between the lines of Wonder Woman comics. By examining the dominant masculine narratives in contrast to the feminine narratives buried within these influential texts, this chapter will resituate empowerment and agency in the superheroine’s Amazon backstory and character. The second chapter of this thesis considers the Wonder Woman’s own influence(s) on modern popular culture, especially in relation to other (super)heroines, and aims to portray Diana as a model of both feminine narrative and female agency. Ultimately, while some have asserted that Wonder Woman is merely “radical—up to a point” (Zechowski and Neumann 136), this project instead portrays the Amazonian princess as an empowering model of both female agency and feminine narrative despite its mythological and superhero roots.
Chapter 1

“I made war because war was made on me”: The Influence of Amazons in Literature on *Wonder Woman* and the Feminine Narrative

On one side of the red-figure amphora, four women swim: They are fresh, young, naked, carefree, unoccupied as they frolic, beautiful and desirable (Figure 1). Two splash in the water and another swims, body prostrate against the black backdrop of the amphora. While these three women face each other, one at the far right of the vase appears to be moving out of the traditional Greek frame. The juxtaposition of this seductive scene and visual frame-breaking, reminiscent of page-turns in comics, creates an effect of voyeurism, urging the viewer to turn the amphora for more. On the other side is a scene of another three women in various states of battle preparation: They are Amazons, powerful and armored with weapons and horses (Figure 2). Again, on the far right side, one woman is in motion, as if to exit the frame. This mirroring and frame-breaking demand the viewer to close the gap between the opposing images and view the scenes as infinitely sequential, Amazons disrobing and swimming and outfitting again for battle and so on for eternity.

This red-figure amphora from an anonymous Attic painter (c. 525 BCE; Mayor 120-123) portrays the eternal tension between the Amazon constructed by ideologically patriarchal narratives—desirable but threatening, yet subject to and subdued by the voyeuristic male gaze—and an underlying opposing feminine narrative that demands its own agency and its own chronicle in history. As it stands, the freedom of feminine identity portrayed on the vase is subject to male depiction and judgment, or, in sum, to the homogenizing patriarchal narrative. Reclaiming the images on this amphora would appeal to Cixous’s demand that a feminine narrative would allow “woman [to] return to the body which has been turned into the uncanny
stranger on display” (350) for the ideological male’s consumption, use, and domination. By reading the feminine narrative of battle-ready, empowered, and free women into these images from under the superficial dominant male narrative, it is possible to recover some of the most culturally iconic female warriors of human history. Their pop culture successor, Wonder Woman, Amazonian princess, would arguably continue this mission into the 21st century.

As a rule, the world of superhero comics from which Wonder Woman stems is rife with allusion, intertextuality, and outright reference. The image/text nature of the medium allows its artists to recall familiar art and popular culture while its writers can build on the epic patterns of the time-worn hero story. DC’s Justice League of America, after all, has its precedent set in King Arthur’s Round Table; the lone avenger motif recalls folktales like “Robin Hood,” myths like Pacifica demigod Maui, Bible stories like Samson, and even canonical literature like William Shakespeare’s Hamlet; the concept of polarized “good versus evil” harkens back to the first book of Psalms; and Captain Marvel’s transforming cry of “Shazam!” is an acronym calling up the empowering identities of Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury. As Marco Arnaudo asserts, superhero narratives closely follow Campbell’s theory of the hero monomyth:
“Whenever he dons a mask and costume and travels to another planet or even just to tops of skyscrapers to defeat supercriminals, the superhero symbolically retraces the traditional journey of the mythical hero” (12). The hero’s journey and subsequent return brings a boon back to his people; in the case of the superhero, this means peace, security, and, sometimes, new knowledge by virtue of dominance over the unconscious evil of the world. Narratives like those of Superman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and others can also be seen to draw on more modern narratives of immigration, alien identity, and refugee experience. These layers of reference and inspiration led Richard Reynolds to insist, in his 1992 book of the same title, that superhero comics are a “modern mythology.”

Superhero comics from Marvel and DC alike, then, rely heavily on age-old and familiar stories. Some stories draw directly from the originals while others, as seen in Superman’s groundbreaking debut, appeal to readers as “fresh, yet familiar” (Clark and Howard 7): the hero tale, but with a twist. In many ways, this popular and vivid refresh on classic narratives serves as the primary backbone and draw of the superhero comics genre. The big three of DC comics—Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, referred to in recent comic and academic publications as “the Trinity,” yet another reference loaded with religious import—are each, as many critics argue, “the respective children of science fiction, street crime, and myth” (Langley and Wood 6). At surface level, these associations seem obvious and, even, superficial. Reynolds suggests that such references to “high-culture” elements are merely a bid to elevate the “low-brow” genre of comics: “There has arguably been a tendency for comic creators to legitimize their offspring by stressing their resemblance to legendary heroes or gods: a strategy to give their disregarded medium a degree of moral and intellectual uplift” (53). This tactic can be irresponsibly tacked on
or, as in *Wonder Woman*, exercised as in-depth and informative world-building that expands both universe and character.

From its inception, Greek and sometimes Roman mythology has infused the universe and characters of the *Wonder Woman* universe. Other than Marvel's Thor, Wonder Woman stands out as one of the only canonical superheroes to draw so explicitly from ancient mythology. The most important mythic allusions are those made to the Amazons that have characterized and developed Diana and her people since William Moulton Marston’s first published comic in 1941. In this same vein, Kelly E. Stanley insists that fundamental to Wonder Woman’s character and narrative is her “Amazon identity, which built the foundations of her inherently contradictory nature” (145) as ideologically ideal female and narratively empowered woman. What Stanley refers to here is that the mythic figure of the Amazon warrior is understood today to be significantly different than the historical reality of the Amazonian people. As has since been proven by modern historians, archaeologists, linguists, and classicists, there did in fact exist “authentic women warriors whose lives matched the descriptions of Amazons in Greek myths, art, and classical histories, geographies, ethnographies, and other writings” (Mayor 20). The conflation of the two figures—historic and mythic warriors—can be seen to inform and influence the pop culture icon of Wonder Woman. By tracing the literary and historical influences of classical mythology, Amazonian legend, medieval literature, and early 18th-century female utopia novels, this chapter aims to highlight and rediscover the feminine narratives hidden in the diverse inspirations and intertextualities that inspired and continue to inspire Wonder Woman.

Mythology, as already stated, has influenced Diana’s identity throughout her lifetime in print: Marston drew convenient bits and pieces from Greek mythology to create Diana’s
character and backstory. On the first page of the first *Wonder Woman* comic, the influence of the canon of Greek mythology is solidified in her debut introduction: “As lovely as Aphrodite—as wise as Athena—with the speed of mercury and the strength of Hercules—she is known only as *Wonder Woman*, but who she is, or whence she came, nobody knows!” (*All Star Comics* #8 (1941)). This introduction is used verbatim as a prologue until 1943, solidly claiming the influence and allusion of classical mythos. George Pérez’s 1987 reboot (Vol. 2, 1987–1992) solidly re-immersed the character and her stories into the world of classical gods, goddesses, and heroes. Greg Rucka’s work (Vol. 2, 2003–2005) followed Pérez’s lead with hegemonic personifications of meddling gods while Brian Azzarrello’s relaunch (Vol. 4, 2011–2016) introduced new and diverse personifications of the gods as well as an ever tenuous relationship between the pantheon and Diana. Ares, God of War, serves consistently as one of Wonder Woman’s greatest nemeses and, depending on the circumstances, greatest ally. She is called upon as Athena’s mortal champion, like Perseus in myth, to defend and honor the goddess’s reputation in duels, challenges, and schemes (Vol. 2, #206–210, #215–217 (2005)). Wonder Woman herself experiences apotheosis à la demigod Hercules, taking the mantles of goddess of truth, death, and war at different points in her career. In Vol. 4, Patty Jenkin’s 2017 film, and the *Superhero Girls* middle-grade books and comics, Diana’s heritage is rewritten so that she is now the daughter of Hippolyta and Zeus, transforming her into a demigod and a major player in the struggles of the mythic pantheon. This reliance on Greek mythology specifically vivifies Wonder Woman’s identity and story, but also recalls the insistently male narratives of Greek literature, histories, and legends.

There is more to Wonder Woman’s mythological inspirations than surface-level allusions and literal manifestations, however. Her world, her identity, and her narrative rely most heavily
on the legends and history of the Amazons, a group or nation thought to comprise only women warriors. Like the extensive canons of superhero comics, especially *Wonder Woman* comics, there is no given narrative that functions to define the legendary race of Amazons. What is available in literature—Greek oral tales and art, medieval romances, pseudo-biographies, dramatic plays, as well as non-Western legends and histories—simultaneously contradicts, complements, and refracts itself. Most of Amazon canon is made up of secondhand narratives that mention, use, or consider Amazonian women, whether as concrete characters, allusion, or, even, gender-focused japes. As classical historian Adrienne Mayor asserts, the Amazons had a “complex identity … enmeshed in history and imagination” (21)—a murky conglomeration of myth, history, literature, art, and prejudice that similarly informs the identity of the modern world’s most iconic Amazon: Wonder Woman.

Relying on only Greek mythology, oral and written histories, and art to understand the Amazons, however, results in a skewed narrative of these warrior women. The hypermasculinity of Greek culture from which we get the first hero myths—*The Iliad* is gestured to as ultimate war story while *The Odyssey* is the original model of the hero journey monomyth—demand the narrative be heavily patriarchal. From the artistic depictions of the ultimate male, whose virility and prowess are represented in his heroically nude body, to literary epics relating the specifics of weapons, battle, and deaths, Greek myth recalls Hourihan’s definition of the ideological male myth as one of dominance and destruction, violence and subjugation of the Other (58). For much of the fifth century BCE, the epitome of Greek civilization, Athens, created literature and art that insistently positioned the Amazons as the ultimate barbaric enemy so that, as Hourihan suggests, the “point of view in a hero story … function[s] to naturalize the point of the view of
the establishment” (41), or the patriarchal status quo. The opposing force to this “establishment” of Greek culture, then, was the Amazons.

Greek narratives function to portray Amazons as the society-threatening Other by emphasizing their unfeminine and non-normative gender qualities. In essence, legends, literature, and art came together to drive home the concept that “Amazon society was the inverse of the polis” (Stewart 574) in that it purported the power of matriarchy and gender equality. The concept of *gynaikokrateid* or “female tyranny”—now recognizable as “matriarchy”—was especially troubling to the Greeks. In fifth-century Athens, only men were considered citizens, and, even then, only purebred Athenian men; women were not citizens and, therefore, had no say in government policy or social mores. Historians, linguists, and translators’ struggles to interpret the Amazons’ first recorded appearance in Homer’s *The Iliad* serve to portray the women warriors as a double conundrum. When the poet acknowledges, in a speech given by Trojan king Priam, that the Amazons were “a match for men in war” (Homer VI.220), Homer invents the ethnic designation, *Amazones antianeirai*. The ethnic designation, a common linguistic and poetic tool of classical epics, functions to denote a plurality, a people, as evidenced in the plural gender-neutral noun “*Amazones*.” The designative adjective “*antianeirai,*” which is easily and often interpreted as “anti-man,” is where most critical disagreements arise. As Andrew Stewart argues, this term is “ambiguous … since *anti-* can mean either ‘opposite to’ or ‘antagonistic to’” (576); Mayor adds that ancient Greek diction does not align with modern English diction so that *anti-* could also mean “equivalent’ or ‘matching’” (23), leading to the interpretation that the Amazon

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5 Translator Robert Fagles’ interpretation of *Amazones antianeirai* can be seen above (“a match for men in war”) to borrow from this last set of potential meanings.
race was female dominated. This ambiguous ethnicity set the ancient patriarchal culture on edge: “... the Greeks used matriarchy as a tool for conceptualizing, explaining, and validating the polis’s customs, institutions, and values by postulating their opposites and revealing them as absurd” (Stewart 574). The fear of matriarchal domination over the patriarchal Greek city-states is revealed in the constant tensions embedded in portrayals of legendary Amazons.

To set up the Amazons as the Greeks’ ultimate nemeses, Greek poets, artists, and historians portrayed the foreigners as barbaric and uncivilized. They chose to portray the assumed all-female race as unnatural as they come: as unfeminine according to Greek ideals. It was generally understood in Greek society that “marriage was for women as war was for men” (Stewart 574); such gender roles were strict as respectable Greek women were expected not to leave the physical confines of the home. In contrast, Amazons were wild and nomadic and bellicose. In Herodotus’s histories, Amazon girls insistently reject the assigned gender roles of sewing, cooking, and cleaning: “We are archers, javeliners, and riders—we have not learnt the works of women” (qtd. Stewart 578). Notably, these activities not only require the women to be active and outdoors but also hold highly phallic symbolism, as if to contrast the Amazons’ masculine-coded work with the feminine-coded work of Greek wives and daughters.

To extend this contrast and defend their own honor when “fighting” (in real life or in fiction) women, the Greeks created a motif in legend of fierce warriors and immasculated women. Narratives in literature and art alike abound in the repeated image of the Greek hero locked in battle with an Amazonian warrior. In fact, an entire art form came of it, known as the Amazonomachy, which portrayed orgiastic melee scenes of Greeks disarming and dominating
Amazon foes (Figure 3). The fourth-century BCE orator Lysias, who insisted the Amazons were the first to mount horses and use iron weapons, was particularly fond of this image in his own written works: “[The Amazons] were regarded as males by their courage rather than females by their nature, they seemed superior to men in spirit, not inferior to them in body” (2.4). Here, we notice the distinction the Greeks attempted to make in portraying Amazons: While they were women in form and therefore grotesque and non-normative in fighting like men, they excelled as men did in spirit. Even as they rejected the Amazons’ non-normative gender roles, the Greeks constructed the warrior women into honorable adversaries to emphasize their hypermasculine heroes’ patriarchal narratives of domination and destruction.

In classical art and literature, the Amazon embodies the modern concept of the sexualizing and arresting male gaze. As Stewart puts it, Amazons were portrayed as “young, trim, and sexy” (572) and wholly—intentionally—unlike Greek wives. The death of an Amazon at the
hands of the heroic man turns triumph into immediate sorrow and mourning. For example, in Quintus of Smyrna’s *The Fall of Troy*, Amazon queen Penthesilea is described as “a raging leopard” (qtd. Mayor 17) in battle against hero Achilles. Alive, the warrior woman is wild, animalistic, and untamable. In death, however, when her helm is removed to reveal her femininity (later made visible with poetic imagery of her hair), the Greek warriors are stunned by her beauty: “Her valor and beauty were undimmed by dust and blood. Achilles’ heart lurched with remorse and desire” (qtd. 17). Her death was necessary to represent the rejection and dominance of the threatening Other, but it is the loss of her beauty—not her prowess as a warrior or her royal blood—that the Greek soldiers mourn. She is more than the physical signs of her death (“dust and blood”) but only insofar that her material beauty has been frozen and objectified, as in artistic representations, for the male warriors’ appreciation and possession.

Thus, the willful and violent Amazon, the opposite of the ideal Greek woman, can be subjugated to the desirous male gaze only in death. By cobbling together the curious rumors, garbled folklore, and wild gossip of travelers and traders, the Greeks ultimately created a cultural narrative that so thoroughly othered and villainized the Amazonian tribe based on gender that the enmity rivals the modern graphic novel concept of “arch-nemeses.”

In the hero myths of Greek literature, an Amazon appears as a mere narrative point to be killed. The Western narratives that feature Amazon-like characters are tales of male power and female subjugation. The ultimate goal of the Amazonian legends and tales as passed down to us from Greek works was simple: The ultimate male—the heroic Greek—must destroy and dominate the monstrous female—the simultaneously savage and desirable Amazon. The homogenous narrative of highly patriarchal Greek culture made the murder of a barbaric, vicious, and independent woman a prime show of male prowess. As Froma Zeitlin notes, the Amazon
“continually complicates the issue of male dominance” (135-136 qtd. Stewart 575) in Greek patriarchal narratives. This juxtaposition of dominant males and female warriors, however, is not reserved for Greek art and literature alone, but extends well beyond the fifth century BCE.

In later, medieval depictions of Amazons, the women warriors are consistently subjected to the power of the heroic male in motifs and structures recalling Greek legends and patriarchal narratives. For instance, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*⁶ (c. 1361-2) is a collection of biographies of 104 renowned women, including five Amazonian queens, with the express purpose of relating “pleasant exhortations of virtues and … incentives for avoiding and detesting [feminine] wickedness” (5). In a way, *De mulieribus claris* was a woman’s “manners” book, complete with fairy-tale morals at the end of the most “wicked” entries. While Boccaccio chose his patron to be a female Italian aristocrat, his use of Latin—in contrast to his previous colloquial Italian in *The Decameron*—and a plural first-person point of view as exemplified in the inclusive pronoun “us” subject these famous women to a congress of decidedly male readers. As the Greeks did before him, Boccaccio resexes the greatest women he writes about, insistently describing their “manly spirit” (4) and “manly fashion” (65) and subsuming their femininity as unvalued unless coded as destructive masculine. In fact, the traditional illustrations associated with *De mulieribus claris* function to similarly erase the feminine gender entirely, instead portraying warrior queens like Penthesilea, Lampedo, and Marpesia fully covered in armor and even helmets; only the women’s hair gives them away (Figures 4 and 5). This attributed “manliness,” translator Virginia Brown insists, is “the highest accolade Boccaccio can bestow upon a woman” (xvii). In this way, Boccaccio’s work suggests that a woman’s performance of the violent and

⁶ The Latin title is generally translated to and published in English as *Famous Women* (see bibliography).
dominant patriarchal hero role is the only way to gain power. He describes how Amazons set aside domestic work and instead “hardened the young girls and prepared them to acquire a man’s strength” (26). Similarly, in describing the too-powerful Penthesilea, Boccaccio raises the classical woman warrior above the 14th-century Italian male:

Some may marvel at the fact that there are women, however well armed, who dare to fight against men. But admiration will cease if we remember that practical experience can change natural dispositions. Through practice, Penthesilea and women like her became much more manly in arms than those born male who have been changed into women—or helmeted hares7—by idleness and love of pleasure. (65)

The medieval writer here transforms warrior women into men (“manly in arms”) while also portraying idle men being “changed into women.” As Boccaccio figures it, then, there is no female

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7 In changing idle men into “women,” Boccaccio emasculates such men as “helmed hares” (“as an hare that weryth an helmet on hys heede,” in original), a term synonymous with “weakling” or “coward”—pursued prey playing at predatory or heroic dominance—in his contemporary literature (“Hare”).
strength. The only way to gauge the strength and bravery of an Amazon warrior is to define her as aligning with the concepts of the monomythic patriarchal hero.

In *De mulieribus claris*, Boccaccio introduces his readers to five Amazonian warriors in detail: Marpesia and Lampedia, Orithya and Antiope, and Penthesilea. These women are shown to “take on a manly spirit, show remarkable intelligence and bravery, and dare to execute deeds that would be extremely difficult even for men” (Boccaccio 4)—but only in conflict with and in contrast to men. Chapters XI and XII on Marpesia and Lampedia relate an origin myth of the Amazonian people in which the women’s tribe is so overrun by (male) enemy forces, they are forced to fight back and, in fairness to those women who did lose husbands in the war, kill off all surviving males in the tribe. Next, in Chapters XIX and XX on Orithya and Antiope, Boccaccio rehashes the myth of Hercules’ eighth impossible task to secure the Amazonian girdle as well as Theseus’s kidnapping and marrying of Hippolyta. When the young princess’s sister Orithya attempts to lay siege to Athens and reclaim her kidnapped sister, she is rebuked by the all-male Athenian armies and forced to admit defeat. Finally, in Penthesilea’s chapter (XXXII), her telic urge throughout the text is “to please Hector” (64) with “illustrious deeds” (65) on the battlefields of the Trojan War, which ultimately leads to her death at the hands of Greek soldier Achilles. Like the Greeks, Boccaccio’s collection of female heroines follows the precedence and approval of the patriarchal narrative, insisting that the Amazon woman must either be destroyed, as in the case of Penthesilea, or subjected to male dominance, as in the cases of kidnapped Hippolyta and militarily defeated Orithya.

This narrative of the male hero dominating or destroying the female warrior figure repeats itself in later literary works as well. Both Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales* (1476) and William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1605)
pick up where Boccaccio left off in Hippolyta’s kidnapping: Theseus has returned triumphant to Athens with a captive and subdued Amazonian wife on his arm. Interestingly, this particular Amazon is Wonder Woman’s mother and Themyscira’s queen and champion in DC canon. In “The Knight’s Tale,” Chaucer describes warmongering Theseus as “swich a conquerour” (48) of the unknown world outside the Athenian borders. His greatest attributes are “his wisdom and chivalry” that allowed him to “conquer[] al the regne of Femenye,” or Amazonia (48-49). His relationship with his captive wife, Hippolyta, is described in equally militaristic and violent terms such that their marriage is an extension of his invasion: “And how asseged was Ipolita, / The faire hardy queen of Scithia” (48). Chaucer shows Theseus besieging (“Assiege”) Hippolyta—militaristically, politically, and sexually—as part of his conquering tour. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s Midsummer, Theseus remains violent conqueror: “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (I.i.16-17). Here, though Theseus speaks of the romantic notions of love and wooing, his words, as in Chaucer, figure the Amazonian queen as a spoil of war, “won” at the edge of the Greek conqueror’s phallic sword. Fairy king Oberon later catalogues Theseus’s prior conquests with the aid of fairy queen Titania:

Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigouna whom he ravishèd,
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa? (Shakespeare II.i.76-79)

Oberon’s list and use of prepositions (“from,” “through,” “with”) liken the Greek hero’s lovers to locations and aligns his sexual relationships with militaristic conquest. Similarly, “ravish,” a term closely associated with rape in medieval language, here allows Theseus’s virile and sexual nature to coincide with his violent, forceful identity as a conqueror. In these ways, later Amazonian
narratives like Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s actively portray Hippolyta’s circumstances as those enacted by the ideally patriarchal hero.

Similarly, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Shakespeare’s Amazons are all delimited within an ideologically circumscribed space. As Homer and other classical writers before him, Boccaccio insistently figures his Amazonian queens as foreign and from far away, beyond the reaches of the civilized world. To exacerbate this, the medieval narratives that follow the “conquered” Hippolyta show her enclosed in a particular space. Upon conquering the Amazonian queen, Chaucer’s Theseus sends her and her sister Emily to Athens, securing and containing the women inside the civilizing walls of the ultimate Greek polis. The walls of Athens also become the walls of marriage from which neither Hippolyta nor Emily can escape. Romantic crux Emily becomes associated with the palace garden where she is observed by her lovers: “And in the gardin, at the sonne up-riste, / She walketh up and doun, and as hir liste” (58). This image of the Amazonian princess pacing the gardens “up and doun”—back and forth, along its enclosing, inescapable walls like a creature in a cage—is juxtaposed with the suggestion that this is how she pleases (“Liste”) to spend her time. Shakespeare’s Hippolyta is effectively silenced by her heroic fiancé who often talks for or over her. Theseus asks the Amazon, “Come, my Hippolyta; what cheer, my love?” (Shakespeare I.i.122), but gives her no vocal or physical space to answer the question. In Midsummer, Hippolyta is never seen alone and instead bordered at all times by Theseus and, sometimes, another male warrior in both her speaking parts and her physical body. When entering scenes, she is accompanied by either Theseus alone or Theseus and “attendant lords” (V.i); when speaking, her voice is caged in by Theseus’ and other male characters’ responses by virtue of being the sole female speaker—even “rude mechanicals” female Thisbe is performed by a man—in a dominantly male setting. The physical spaces of the Amazonian character in these
narratives, then, are repeatedly invaded by male characters and coded as ideologically bounded by patriarchal borders and bodies.

These tropes of violent, dominating men and cordoned feminine spaces/places are just as prevalent in the Amazon narratives of the *Wonder Woman* saga. Like the mythological, semi-historical, and fictional figure Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen of the same name in *Wonder Woman* is repeatedly subjected to violent attempts of domination. Both Marston and Pérez’s respective origin stories feature the legend of Hercules’ (sometimes Herakles’) impossible task: In Vol. 1 #1 (1941), the Amazons are enslaved by Hercules and his heroic crew and set to backbreaking work; in Vol. 2 #1 (1987), Hippolyta is viciously tricked by Hercules and all of the Amazons are imprisoned and violated off the page. With earnest prayer, Hippolyta calls the Amazons’ patron goddess (or goddesses, depending on the installment) to her aid. In Vol. 1 #1 (1941), Aphrodite promises deliverance on one condition: “[T]hat we leave the man-made world and establish a new world of our own!” In Vol. 2 #1 (1987), upon seeing her warriors destroy Hercules’ forces out of blind vengeance, Hippolyta banishes herself and her Amazons away from the violence, strife, and patriarchal status quo that could not withstand strong women—“regarded by all mankind as different … strange … and even inhuman!”—in Man’s World. Aphrodite leads the Amazons to Paradise Island; Hippolyta discovers Themyscira. These geographic locations are remote and removed and as untouchable by a male body as the Amazons themselves. To counter the delimiting spaces for strong warrior women seen in Chaucer and Shakespeare’s Amazon narratives, the Amazons of *Wonder Woman* inflict their own physical and geographic separation from the violence of patriarchal systems.

Interestingly, the Amazons’ enclosure recalls a group of women that K.A. Laity has referred to as the most beloved heroines of Early Modern literature: medieval Christian
anchoresses. These women were religious figures who chose to be enclosed in an anchorhold—a physical and spiritual space that was intentionally walled-off from a church—to attain peak religiosity. While their masculine counterparts in literature were knights and romantic heroes who rode off on mystic and allegorical adventures, anchoresses were solidly real and realistically reflective of medieval gender norms. Because these women could not be allowed by social strictures to live in the uncivilized wild as religious male hermits did, they were enclosed in the civilizing structure of the church, which “offered one of the few opportunities for independence and a little authority” (Laity 44) for medieval women. As the Amazons of Wonder Woman exit Man’s World for Themyscira, so too did anchoresses exit the fleshly world for the religious world. Some anchoresses were symbolically entombed, never to leave their anchorhold again when the last brick was set, while others had doors locked from the outside so that they could still have personal interactions but could not exit. Medieval popular imaginations simultaneously restricted and vivified the most iconic anchoresses as the Greeks did the Amazons. The ultimate anchoritic text, the Ancrene Wisse, as well as the male anchor Augustine advised that women could not devote their lives to Christ—they were innately sinful for their “phallic lack” (Laity 45)—and therefore had to “unsex” themselves: “[Women] had to remove that difference and become the original (male) in order to match God’s perfection from which they were a deviation” (45). This could be enacted by rejecting their fleshly bodies: eating sparingly, wearing habits, and praying for hours on their knees to exact punishment on their feminine physicality. At the same time, the Ancrene Wisse calls for the anchoresses to metaphorically figure themselves as Jesus’s adoring lover, a contradictory sensualizing and sexualizing move that demands femininity be readable at a glance as with the Greeks’ portrayal of the Amazons: “… [F]orget all the world, be wholly out of your body, embrace in shining love your lover who has alighted into the bower of
your heart from heaven” (Anchoritic Spirituality 59). These extended metaphors at once deny and sensualize the anchoresses’ feminine bodies: “Who will grant that you may come into my heart and make it drunk, that I may embrace you” (59; emphasis original). In these anchoritic texts, extended metaphors of romantic embraces and kisses serve to simultaneously free the female spiritual body and entomb it in the physical construct(ion) of the church. Like the classical and medieval literature that portrayed Amazons, the realistic and fictional literature that portrayed anchoresses effectively mirrored the patriarchal rejection of the female individual in a male role on the sole basis of their gender and its ideological constructs.

The surface level of these literary heroine narratives, then, is overtly patriarchal and adheres to the structure and themes of the monomythic hero’s violent and homogenizing tale. These narratives have been categorized as canonical by virtue of their ideological adherence to patriarchal structures. Other recognizable female heroes like Iceni queen Boudicca and French warrior Joan of Arc follow the narrative of the conventional male hero because, as Hourihan asserts, in “most retellings of their exploits they are little more than honorary men who undertake male enterprises in a male context and display ‘male’ qualities: courage, single-minded devotion to a goal, stoicism, self-confidence, certitude, extroversion, aggression” (68). As women playing at conventional male hero and overstepping the power dynamic allotted their gender, both Boudicca and Joan were put to death at the violent hands of the dominating and invasive male powers of their respective narratives. Heroines who fulfill the role of “honorary man” function to “doubly devalue women, first by focusing on spheres of male action and thus implying the superior importance of men and their doings, and second by obliterating the women’s specifically female qualities and reconstructing them as merely imperfect males” (Hourihan 206). In much the same way, when the Amazons of Wonder Woman relinquish their tenets of peace, love, and
justice, their patrons mete out punishment for their overstepping. In Vol. 3 #12 (2007), Themyscira is lost when the warrior women attack and lay waste to Washington, DC, as influenced by the sadistic and violent villain Circe. For their hubris—“excessive arrogance” and “wanton violence” (Vol. 3 #12 (2007))—and, by extent, assumption of a patriarchal hero role, the Amazons are locked from their feminine-coded space, “their heritage stripped” (Vol. 3 #12 (2007)), until Wonder Woman once again shows them peace and justice, the Amazonian way.

As previously noted, the world into which the medieval model of Amazon, Hippolyta, enters in both Chaucer and Shakespeare is one of violence, conquest, domination, and boundaries. In considering Amazons-turned-Greeks like Hippolyta, Keiko Hamaguchi applies a postcolonial lens in arguing that Chaucer’s Amazons use “strategic mimicry” to maintain power in their new realm such that “she who formerly pursued masculine activities now, in her colonized condition, imitates Western feminine conduct” (336). By so doing, the Amazon does not destroy her non-normative self, a gendered counterpart to Frantz Fanon’s “turn white or disappear” (qtd. Hamaguchi 336), but instead creates herself and her power in Athens. As Hippolyta, Emily, and Theseus travel to Greece, the Amazon women discover their model for Greek femininity. A group of mourning women manage to stop the proud king’s conquering march with their laments: “Swich a cry and swich a wo they make, / That in this world nis creature living, / That herde swich another weymentinge” (Chaucer 50). The Greek people’s sorrow is given voice (“Wayment”) by the throats of the women, a classical mourning tradition often mimicked in the Greek chorus in drama. The eldest mourner begs that Theseus hear their pleas: “Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentilesse, / Up-on us wrecched wommen lat thou falle” (Chaucer 50). She figures herself as lowly suppliant to a great lord at the same time that she belittles their state as “wrecched women” in need of a heroic and honorable (“Gentilesse”) man.
The display, though succinct in the knight’s narration, is dramatic and performative and serves as Hippolyta and Emily’s first example of female gender roles in Greek patriarchal society.

Rather than bend to the will of the patriarchal ideology of Athens, however, Hippolyta and Emily instead manipulate Athenian ideology to meet their own needs and create their own selfhood in the foreign land. In the next instance in which we see Hippolyta, Emily, and conqueror Theseus together, the pair of Amazonian women are described as portraying “verray wommanhede” (Chaucer 94-95) not because of their striking appearance, apparel, or gentleness, as is so often the case in romantic heroines. Instead, the Amazons perform “true womanhood” as they had previously observed and understood it. Theseus has ordered the Trojan prisoners Arcita and Palamon, jealous lovers dueling for an unaware Emily, be put to death, but is interrupted by the Amazons and their female retinue’s cries: “The queen anon … / Gan for to wepe, and so did Emelye, … / ‘Have mercy, lord, up-on us wommen alle!’” (94) The Amazonian women repeat almost word for word the laments of the traditional Greek mourning women; in effect, they are mimicking “verray wommanhede.” Hippolyta and Emily use the mourning women as models to fulfill the patriarchal gender role that demands, as Chaucer’s narrator-knight generically describes, “wommen have swich sorwe” (148). Rather than allow Theseus to murder his prior enemies—and, by extent, perhaps, the Amazons’ potential allies—the performing women intercede and demand the king spare the men’s lives. By rationalizing and mimicking the role of emotional Greek feminine, Hippolyta and Emily reveal the artificiality of the power of the ultimate Athenian male, King Theseus, and also manipulate the power afforded them as women.

In much the same way, Midsummer’s soon-to-be-married Hippolyta regularly refutes Theseus’s claims with rational argumentation that, in effect, demands an equalizing of the king’s power structure. Interestingly, scenes involving the Greek and the Amazon in conversation
bookend the rising and falling action of the play such that Hippolyta has more space and freedom to speak as the comedy opens and closes. Theseus’s opening lines lament having to wait for his wedding night, feminizing the delay brought on by night, symbolized by the moon who “lingers my desires / Like to a stepdame or a dowager” (Shakespeare I.i.4-5). Hippolyta’s response is cutting and rational and eradicates Theseus’s attempt to blame feminine nature:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then moon, like to a silver bow
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities. (I.i.7-11)

The Amazon has no time for dramatic hyperbole, and instead deals in dry facts and serious terms, as evidenced by her use of quantitative reasoning and ceremonial tone. Her lines are not all solemn, however, as she returns respect and emotion to her poetic figuring of the moon in contrast to her fiancé’s bawdy feminization. This is not the only time Hippolyta actively and openly refutes Theseus’s romantic advances and manly inclinations to vigor and violent action. When the king wishes to demand further evidence of Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena’s misadventures, an interrogation of mind akin to his legendary invasion of the Amazonian homeland/body, Hippolyta openly rejects his order:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy’s images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable. (V.i.23-27)
Here, the Amazonian queen uses the evidence of the lovers’ like “minds” and “story” to mean their experiences are true and valid. While Theseus figured the recounting of the night as “airy nothing” (V.i.16), Hippolyta counters his devaluing of individuals’ perspectives as a valuable “something” that was all the more powerful for its seemingly strange coincidence. In these ways, the seemingly-conquered Amazonian queen refutes not only the Greek king’s political authority over his subjects but also the ideological authority of the patriarchy over narratives as well.

Despite the superficial patriarchal narrative that insists Hippolyta has been disempowered by virtue of Theseus conquering her home and body, the underlying feminine narrative instead reasserts power in the woman’s voice, emotion, and rationality.

In these narratives in which the feminine can be rediscovered in contrast to the dominating patriarchal masculine, the Amazonian women empower themselves even in delimiting spaces and situations. The most ideologically civilizing of these situations is marriage to a Greek: In Chaucer, Emily is handed off as a prize object to the winning Trojan hero; in Shakespeare, Hippolyta is merely waiting to be wedded to Theseus. Marriage symbolizes the ultimate domestication of the uncontained Amazonian feminine as paralleled by battle-won death as ultimate destruction. In both “The Knight’s Tale” and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Emily and Hippolyta actively resist their marriage to Greek men, often turning to the goddess Diana (Artemis in Greek mythos)—a key Amazonian patron and Diana’s namesake in Wonder Woman—and the moon for salvation. Shakespeare’s Hippolyta refers to the moon and “moonshine” at least five times in her dozen or so lines while Chaucer’s Emily appeals directly to the goddess Diana to protect her from marriage and an un-Amazonian life. Emily calls on the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{8}}\text{ Ovid also substitutes the name “Titania”—the name of Shakespeare’s fairy queen—for the name “Diana” in Metamorphoses, another interesting connection to the Wonder Woman Amazons.}\]
“Godesse of maydens, that myn herte hast knowe / Ful many a yeer” (Chaucer 122) to maintain, specifically, her chaste virginity. In Greek mythology, Artemis is known as the goddess of the hunt and of virgins; she is “the protectress of dewy youth” (Hamilton 31) but can also be fierce and vengeful. Like the moon with its many faces, Artemis-Diana is also associated with a trinity of goddesses: “Diana, the huntress on the earth, Luna, the moon in the heavens, often identified with Fortune, and Proserpina, goddess of the underworld, Pluto’s sometime bride” (Hamaguchi 353-354). While Emily’s male lovers beg for the patronage of Venus-Aphrodite, goddess of love, and Mars-Ares, goddess of war, Emily performs rites of supplication to this triumvirate goddess who refuses all patriarchal categorization of the feminine.

By appealing to Artemis-Diana to decide the fate of herself and her Amazonian virginity, Emily performs the role of religious devotee but for her pagan patroness. The Amazon speaks “with pitous chere” (Chaucer 122), which at first seems to refer to her pitiful state, but, instead, based on Chaucer’s regular use of the term “pitous,” characterizes Emily as pious, godly, and devout (“Piteous”). This portrayal of the Amazon virgin as well as her appeal to Diana’s “thre formes that thou hast in thee” (Chaucer 122)—a trinity, but a feminized trinity—recalls another literary and historical figure: namely, the early modern martyred female saints. Like the aforementioned medieval anchoresses, virgin saints were able “to claim authority … in God’s name” (Laity 44), but were regularly portrayed, as the Amazons were, as a romantic ideal and realistic moralization of the feminine. Often in literature, women martyrs were stylized to have

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9 Please note that there is no evidence to suggest the historical Amazons at any time or for any reason worshipped the Greco-Roman pantheon. This is a Westernization canonized by the Greeks in the 3rd century BCE and continued by Wonder Woman creator Marston in the 20th century CE.
“unearthly beauty” (46) to set them apart as superlatively female and pure: virgin saint Christina of Markyate is described as a “noble … maiden of uncommon holiness and beauty” (Talbot 35); martyred St. Catherine is “a young girl of high rank and great beauty” (Wogan-Browne and Burgess 5) whose very name referenced the Greek katharos, “pure” (xx); and saint-performer Emily is both “an aungel” (Chaucer 59) and “fairest was to sene / Than is the lile upon his stalk grene / And fresher than the May with floures newe” (56). The saints were as pure and untouched as Diana-Artemis’s natural domain. Readers and characters alike regularly marveled at the virgin saints’ “sudden strength” (Laity 48) in the face of danger, patriarchal tyranny, and bodily harm—all often bundled together in the form of unconsented marriage, as in Chaucer—
that was wielded as “borrowed power” (45). Another power of many women martyrs was their eloquent use of rhetoric, logic, and formal disputation in exerting the will and power of God. St. Catherine, for instance, is known for her intelligence: “[Her father] had her taught letters and how to argue a case and defend a position. There was no dialectician on earth who could defeat her in argument” (Wogan-Browne and Burgess 5). It is her argumentation and logic that neutralizes the pagan Emperor Maxentius’s violence. These women saints, virginal, strong, and rational as the Amazons of history and legend, were, like the anchoresses, the heroines of medieval literature. The simultaneously romantic and realistic portrayals of medieval women martyrs inspired and gave “strength to men and women who sought to live a better life and overcome the struggles inherent in living according to an exacting spiritual path” (Laity 51).

Who else is uncommonly beautiful, strong, rational, and granted power by a patroness? Who else is an ultimate synthesis of these disparate classical and medieval influences but the modern Amazonian princess, Wonder Woman, herself? Just as superheroine Wonder Woman straddles the line between godliness and humanness, so too have literary Amazons fluctuated between the mythical and the historical. In the classical narrative the Argonautia by Appollonius of Rhodes, the writer describes three Amazonian tribes scattered across the land of, most likely, Asia Minor: The Chadesians of Chadesia, the Lykastians of Lykastia (“Wolf-land”), and the Themiscyrian Amazons (Mayor 165). Fascinatingly, the latter Amazons of Themyscira—a geographic name borrowed by relaunch writers in the Wonder Woman saga—were thought to inhabit or visit a small island known as Ares or Amazon Island whose existence has since been proven by archeologists. Now called Giresun Island, a four-acre plot off the coast of modern-day Turkey (referenced directly in Wonder Woman Vol. 5 #6 (2016)) it seems to have once been a place of worship and sacrifice to perhaps the ancient goddess-mother Cybele or the divine
horsewoman Lady Amezan of the steppes (Mayor 166). A mile from the mainland, this island separated the real-life warrior women from invading—usually all-male, Greek—forces and offered a space for creativity, nurturance, and equality before a shared divinity.

As in history, so too in comics: The island of the Wonder Woman sagas, Themyscira, is portrayed as a haven for peace, learning, nurturance, and all womankind. Marston’s Paradise Island has “no want, no illness, no hatreds, no wars” and is home to “a race of Wonder Women” (Action Comics #1 (1941)); it is a “haven of peace and protection … which no man may enter—a paradise for women only!” (Vol. 1 #1 (1942)). More recent visualizations of the island feature a lush, green land on which the Amazon civilization spreads and thrives; spaces, especially building ceilings, are open and accessible. The Amazons’ dedication to their patron goddesses ensure their safety, their immortality, and their powers in different Wonder Woman iterations. In these representations, the influence of Amazonian literature, history, and mythology on Wonder Woman begins to come full circle.

Why, of all mythological figures, Amazons? According to Jill Lepore’s speculations, the icon of the Amazon was especially rampant in Wonder Woman creator Marston’s social, political, and creative circle. In 1911, as Marston started at college, the terms “Amazon” and “New Women” were used interchangeably to refer to any woman rebel—which, as Lepore notes, often meant “any girl who left home and went to college” (17). One of his wives’ aunts was Margaret Sanger, an early advocate for birth control and female power. These were the freedoms from patriarchal strictures that early 20th-century women sought. Similarly, bohemian author and women’s rights advocate Inez Haynes Gillmore regularly referenced Amazons in her work, such as the historical Angels and Amazons (1933) and the fictional Angel Island (1914); the latter work described “super-humanly beautiful” (Gillmore 61) women warriors and Amazonian revolution
in the face of patriarchal dominance and physical violence. When Gillmore’s Amazons’ angel-like wings are clipped by jealous and desirous human men, a resourceful and strong hero must arise among them to protect herself and her sisters. The way Marston has 1940s Steve Trevor refer to Diana repeatedly as a “beautiful angel”—to which Wonder Woman quips, “What’s an angel? I think I’d rather be a woman” (Sensation Comics #2 (1942))—recalls this early 20th-century association of literary Amazons with contemporary activist and rebel angels. Further, as philologist Celeste Turner Wright’s contemporary writings suggest, it was a popular assumption at the time of Marston’s development of Wonder Woman that “Amazons were the foremost examples of feminism” (433). In fact, in an article from The Washington Post titled “Neglected Amazons to Rule Men in 1,000 Yrs., Says Psychologist,” Marston is declared, “The next 100 years will see the beginning of an American matriarchy—a nation of amazons in the psychological rather than the physical sense” (qtd. Lepore 170; sic). Even in the 1940s, then, the mythological narrative of the uncontrollable Amazon under threat of male domination was familiar to young female students, women’s rights activists, and Wonder Woman readers alike.

Like Gillmore’s angel-Amazons and her mythological predecessors before her, Wonder Woman has been set up in opposition to male-initiated violence. In many of her early storylines, prior to 1950s censorship, Wonder Woman regularly faced off with men pointing guns directly at her on her cover pages. The visuals of these gun-heavy comics show Diana filling the majority of the page and holding the high ground of the image—filling the top left corner and middle of the page—while firearm-wielding enemies barely fit in the frame in the opposing lower right corner (Figures 8 and 9). She is positioned in direct and empowered opposition to these guns and yet does not reciprocate the violence, but instead used her own strength to deflect and
counter the technologically modern onslaught. While mythical and literary Hippolyta faced Hercules and Theseus, early comic book Wonder Woman faced gun-toting gangsters and Nazis.

Diana’s many experiences in Man’s World (sometimes referred to as Patriarch’s World) went much the same way. In *Sensation Comics* #2 (1942), Marston’s third-ever *Wonder Woman* release, Diana’s exit from Paradise Island and entrance into Man’s World are described by a juxtaposition of violence and peace:

Into this tortured, upside-down world of men, torn by hatreds, war and destruction, comes *Wonder Woman*, a powerful being of light and happiness! She comes from Paradise Island, the home of the Amazons, where life is eternal, where sorrow and suffering are unknown, and where love and justice make women strong beyond the dreams of men!
Here, Man’s World is portrayed as a realm of the patriarchal hero narrative—destruction and dominance reign—that contrasts sharply with the world of the Amazons in which Wonder Woman grew up. The delineated space of Paradise Island/Themyscira is one of nurturance that recalls the separate but empowered narratives of Amazons in classical and medieval works. As a child of Paradise Island, Diana develops into a heroine and even a savior figure whose very character serves as “a new hope for salvation from old world evils, conquest and aggression!” *(Sensation Comics #2 (1942))*. Where the evils of the ideologically patriarchal “old world,” nurtured by narratives of monomythic heroes in Greek mythology, medieval literature, early modern saints’ lives, and more would demand a delimited, threatened space in which to contain an Amazon such as Diana, she is able to move between feminine (private) and masculine (public) spaces without losing power. For example, a 2017 *Wonder Woman* publication sees Diana coming into contact with extremist terrorism—modern Nazis, writer Greg Rucka seems to suggest—in a busy mall area, and her first response is to subdue the attackers: “No. This is not a battlefield. Put the guns away” *(Vol. 5 #10)*. She recognizes the public space as one of leisure, families, and love and rejects the invasion of violence and guns into it. Her heroism, like that of the female martyrs, is equalizing, nurturing, and protective, not dominating or destructive.

While the fictional Man’s World of *Wonder Woman* is characterized by destruction and dominance, Wonder Woman and her fellow Amazons are set up in a way to dismantle the monomythic patriarchal narrative. In Pérez’s Vol. 2 #13 (1988), for example, the patron-goddess Hera declares, referring to her godly spouse Zeus’s many heroic projects: “From Prometheus through Heracles through Ares we have let the madness escalate -- but no longer!” Instead, Hera and her fellow goddesses insist that it is the destiny of the Amazons—and, most especially, Wonder Woman, their champion—to right Zeus’s many wrongs. By interrupting and regularly
supplanting the heroes recognizable from Greek myths and even other classical and medieval Amazon narratives, the Amazons of *Wonder Woman* and Diana herself function to disrupt the ideologically male monomyth of the hero. Shortly after Hera’s above declaration, a penitent Heracles presents himself to his previous victims, the Amazons of Themyscira, and begs their forgiveness. The Amazons greet him not with rejection and violence but instead mirror the just and nurturing response of their princess: “Heracles -- I will not leave you. Such suffering must stop. If Zeus has punished you thus, then I will share your penance” (Vol. 2 #13 (1988)). The Amazons are seen crying and hugging the demigod; nurturing his physically and socially creative rather than violently destructive nature and, thereby, exemplifying the genders’ “equal merit” for empowerment—a contrast to Heracles’ prior fight for his “right as a man” (Vol. 2 #13 (1988)) as exemplified in his role in classical Amazon narratives. In much the same way, Diana’s experiences in Man’s World undermine the ideological hero narrative in favor of one benefiting and nurturing all. As Jeffner Allen notes in regards to the matriarchal, and, by extension, feminist, underpinnings of classical Amazon myths, “The startling repercussions of these textual worlds take by surprise, and devastate, the patriarchal institutions which would control the distribution of meaning, value, and physical goods against the self-defined interests of each women” (107). This reconstruction of cultural meaning and value is continued in the Amazon narratives of the *Wonder Woman* saga as Diana and her fellow warrior women repeatedly save the world with compassion, love, justice, and equality.

The mythological and literary influences on *Wonder Woman* serve to reveal not only the origin of her story but also the very deconstructive nature of her character and narrative. In classical mythology and legends, the Amazon is a fierce but monstrous woman that must be subjugated by death or by marriage to the will of a man. In medieval literature, the story
continues as the violent male hero subjugates the Amazon queen—usually Hippolyta, Wonder Woman’s mother and therefore the heroine’s birthright—to his destructive nature. Even medieval legends of female saints, martyrs, and anchoresses demand the feminine gender is too threatening to the patriarchal order of the church and religious society; their greatest contribution is their symbolic or literal death or marriage to a higher power. These ideological and patriarchal narratives feed into the monomyth narrative of the ultimate man, but the character of Wonder Woman that is their legacy is untamable and unassimilable in most normative Western structures because she counteracts these male narratives with feminine narratives of creativity, logic, nurturance, and more. By examining these deconstructive mythological and literary storylines, it is possible to highlight more than the Amazonian backstory of the *Wonder Woman* saga. Instead, Diana’s superhero adventures can be seen to overtly model and empower a feminine narrative that disrupts the monomythic hero narrative that reigns over much of Western literature.

As a culmination of all of these influences on her Amazonian character and narrative, one scene in 2017’s *Wonder Woman* cinematic release stands out. The climax of the No Man’s Land and small town skirmish sequence shows the female hero rewriting the male battle narrative. In the space of the trenches, Diana already stands out. Steve Trevor tells her that saving civilians lives is not the priority, that is not what they are on the frontlines of World War I to do, but Wonder Woman refutes that statement, declaring softly, “No, but it is what I am going to do.” While Steve rationalizes the loss of life, Diana adamantly refuses to leave others, especially those who cannot fight for themselves, unprotected. Despite men insisting that No Man’s Land cannot be crossed, Diana single-handedly brings the occupying Axis forces to their knees (literally). In doing so, she is patient and logical; she does not rush the trek, and she does not attack until the
battle has turned in her favor. The final enemy is a sniper, located high in the church bell tower. Mimicking an Amazonian battle tactic, Steve lifts Diana on a makeshift springboard and launches her in the air. Diana crashes into the church steeple, demolishes it, and replaces it. When the dust clears, she stands, tall and triumphant. The people of the town adore her, praise her, touch her, and thank her with food and music (Figure 10). In this moment, Diana recalls the literature and myth that has influenced her character and narrative: She is vicious warrior woman, equal to men; she is Chaucer’s Emily, escaping from within physical and metaphorical boundaries; she is Shakespeare’s Hippolyta, rationalizing language to her own needs; she is a goddess among mortals; an anchoress burst from her hold; virgin saint; suffragette and angel; feminine hero; Amazon incarnate.

*Figure 10* Gal Gadot as Diana in *Wonder Woman* (2017) surrounded by reverent and thankful villagers.
Chapter 2

“Woman draws her story into history”: Wonder Woman’s Influence in Comics and Popular Culture

The comics genre—especially when exemplified in its superhero sagas—is distinguished by its expansive and serial nature. In the case of superhero publishing conglomerates like DC and Marvel, their products depict a multitude of iconic characters, events, relationships, and narratives that are ever evolving and depict awareness of these evolutions. That is to say, the Diana of Wonder Woman #37 (2018) is theoretically connected to and aware of the Wonder Woman of All Star Comics #8 (1941) as well as the multitude of Wonder Woman alternate identities from DC’s era of infinite multiverses. DC properties like Wonder Woman, Superman, Batman, and the Justice League unite as a “collective narrative millions of pages long that has developed over several decades, and, as a result, has taken a particular path, encountered particular challenges, and articulated certain responses in a way that has no parallel in any other form of modern literature” (Arnaudo 4). These challenges have abounded in the last 80 years of superhero tales and have been influenced by such factors as censorship, changing politics and social mores, and art and plots changing hands over and over.

Diana, as constant and present as her mythological namesake, has remained a steadfast DC mainstay even during the comic industry’s many changes. As an icon, she has survived by the skin of her teeth; as a character, less so. When the comic conglomerates came together to institute self-censorship starting in the 1950s, Wonder Woman all but disappeared. Pinpointed in 1954 by Frederic Wertham’s study of crime comic books as “one of the most harmful” (64) for developing child readers, the Wonder Woman saga was cleansed, romanticized, and subjugated to male character and narrative power: Her main concerns were romance and Steve Trevor’s many
marriage proposals, while her position in the Justice League became one of glorified, stay-at-home secretary. At the height of the Silver Age of comics, pinpointed as an era known for its “depth of characterization” and “rise of continuity” (Smith 111), Wonder Woman is stripped of her superhero powers and instead has become a mod shopgirl intent on breaking the mystery of her boyfriend Steve Trevor’s imprisonment; Amazons, Greek mythology, and superheroism are all but erased from Diana’s timeline. Critics and readers alike condemn the Wonder Woman saga’s 1950s-1970s run: “Her bland storylines and loss of feminist advocacy made Wonder Woman a hindrance for future women to overcome, rather than a champion to emulate” (Whaley and Wigard 202). Later, during the Bronze Age of comics, when storylines were gritty and dark and featured “more human heroes” (Eveleth 128), Diana was stripped of her title as Wonder Woman, beat out by Artemis, a Bana-Mighdall Amazon, and strapped into biker girl leather as the new Wonder Woman’s unwanted sidekick. Despite these eras that dissolved Diana’s powers and attempted to disempower her character, she has remained a mainstay of DC’s comic line and popular culture.

Why? According to Kelly E. Stanley, Wonder Woman’s pop-culture status has survived 75 years because she represents and conforms to (even while she contorts) the American social construct of the “ideal” woman (143). As such, the Wonder Woman saga has changed drastically over time to suit the latest cultural constructs of “womanhood.” In fact, as Stanley argues, Diana has been “reinvented more drastically and more frequently than any other comic-book character” (143) to meet these ideological expectations of the “ideal” woman. With a record-breaking five relaunches of her series, Wonder Woman has undergone consistent reinvention. Her origin

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10 These relaunches are popularly referred to as “volumes” by collectors and sellers: Volume 1 (1942-1986); Volume 2 (1987-2006); Volume 3 (2006-2010); Volume 4, an extension of DC’s “New 52” series
story and adventures have been revised, rehearsed, and reinvented numerous times. Stanley lays blame on “the post-Marston male writers’ and editors’ [creative] discomfort with the character” (153) while others suggest that these “reinventions” are in fact an in-narrative eradication of the “monstrous feminine” as enacted by patriarchal cultural authority. These assertions focus attention on Wonder Woman as a feminist icon subjugated to the patriarchal power of American ideology and the comics industry.

The critical assumption, then, has remained that the Wonder Woman saga is a girl’s story in a man’s world. (A multitude of essays and book chapters are titled with derivatives of that idea: “A (Wonder) Woman in a Man’s World.”) She is figured in much of the criticism as, as Wertham insisted in his condemnation of comic books, “a horror type”: “She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, ‘phallic’ woman … being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be” (34). Diana is consistently set up in contrast to the patriarchal agenda at the same time she is described as aligned with it: She pretends at maleness but ought to be female (but isn’t). As Sharon Zechowksi and Cary E. Neumann also insist, “Although her mission is to combat the evils of patriarchy, Wonder Woman is also its ultimate project of female perfection” (134). In a culture, an industry, and a genre predominated by male authorities, writers and artists, and heroes, Wonder Woman’s femininity is, put simply, confusing to most involved.

As ancient mythology has its legends and epics of heroic prowess and military victory, so too do superhero comics. The most highly lauded superhero narratives of the twentieth and the twenty-first century are never those of a female heroine. Often considered by critics as one of the
greatest superhero comics along with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986), Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) is a gritty and dystopic look on the superhero genre and its contemporary times. This arc in the *Batman* saga is celebrated for its honest and scathing “political and social critique [which] posits a rekindling of American mythology and engendering of individual aspirations and agency” (Murphy). As the narrative of an older Batman returning to his cape and cowl after years away, Miller’s hero of Gotham is critically acclaimed as having fought the genre’s then-stagnant status quo, establishing a “new orthodoxy” (Schellenberg 216 qtd. Murphy) of the graphic novel pantheon. This Batman is quarter-life-crisis Batman, but successful and celebrated white man all the same for having contorted the overused tropes and narratives of the superhero genre. As in myth, so in comics: Male characters, writers, and artists alike have, as mentioned before, “usually established the rules, as well as symbols, of victory” (Barron 30). This is the superhero narrative that so many critics, writers, and readers would like Wonder Woman to fit into as a woman in a man’s world.

Instead of considering Diana as a woman fulfilling a man’s story—be it Superman’s narrative outline, Marston’s idealistic story, or the American man’s ideal woman—I aim to reconfigure the popular and cultural influence of Wonder Woman as a woman in a woman’s story. By considering the *Wonder Woman* saga as a model of both feminine narrative and female agency, Diana’s story is revealed to be one of equality, nurturance, creativity, and emotional and rational support in contrast to the predominant patriarchal narrative of dominance, destruction, and physical violence. Wonder Woman has stood out—and caused controversy, as many female icons have—for her body, her brand of heroism in contrast to other superheroines, and her lasting influence on American culture and pop culture despite the genre’s tendency to ignore, subjugate, or kill off female super and non-superheroines. The question is: How?
When Wonder Woman’s silver screen debut in Zach Snyder’s *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2015) and Gal Gadot’s casting were announced in 2013, popular responses were less than stellar. Internet forums and online articles abounded with comments and headlines that insisted Gadot was not the right fit for the job. Why? “Don’t be shy. They said that I was too skinny and my boobs were too small,” Gadot summarized unabashedly for Israeli entertainment news site Ynet (Andriakos). In Vol. 3 #34 (2009), Diana’s ally Black Canary lets the princess know her breasts are ranked second: “After Power Girl, of course…. Trust me on this, those things are considered like a national treasure.” Even within the *Wonder Woman* saga, she is monitored in-person and online for her bodily assets. When not discussing her buxomness or lack thereof, readers of the *Wonder Woman* comics also regularly complain that Diana is “too buff.” One mother I spoke with who was searching for graphic novels for her daughter rejected the traditional Wonder Woman art and narrative in favor of the elseworld\textsuperscript{11} series, *Wonder Woman ’77* (compare Figures 11 and 12): “My daughter doesn’t like when she’s big and muscular. It’s too much.”\textsuperscript{12}

First and foremost, the greatest criticism of Wonder Woman and the comic series has been its representation of the female body. From start, the public opinion of Wonder Woman’s body has been of paramount significance. Early letters sent between creator William Moulton Marston, first artist Henry George Peter, and editor William Gaines portray the men’s especial

\textsuperscript{11} “Elseworld” is a term used to describe a graphic novel series that is set outside the canonical narrative established by DC. In this case, *Wonder Woman ’77* (2015-2016) is set in the alternate universe of the 1970s TV series starring actress and Miss World champion Lynda Carter.

\textsuperscript{12} Overheard at Barnes and Noble Booksellers Ann Arbor.
interest in how their female superhero would look. As Lepore summarizes, “Peter got his instructions: draw a woman who’s as powerful as Superman, as sexy as Miss Fury, as scantily clad as Sheena the jungle queen, and as patriotic as Captain America” (196). Gaines in particular insisted that she should wear very little—“to be as naked as he could get away with” (196)—in order to sell more of the comics. As Peter and Marston worked on the development of Wonder Woman’s appearance, she consistently morphed between a dreamy, innocent 1890s Gibson girl and a racy, skin-baring 1940s Varga girl. (Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Diana would similarly emulate the zaftig body type of media icons like Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield (Stanley 151).) Marston enjoyed noting that Peter’s best drafts were “very cute” (qtd. Lepore 197; emphasis original) as if, despite his own feminist agenda, this were the primary concern of the comic. By combining Marston and Peter’s images of an independent, empowered woman with
Gaines’ desire for a sexy heroine, the final product was, as Lepore suggests, “the suffragist as pin-up” (198), the Amazon frozen in art (see Chapter 1), the empowered woman at the whim of the patriarchal male gaze.

Wonder Woman’s appearance has changed over time, but her body and clothing are often the only subjects of critical discussion. Two months after the 2017 announcement that she would serve as an honorary United Nations ambassador for gender equality, Wonder Woman was stripped of the title because UN staffers were concerned she sent the wrong message: “… 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 with an American flag motif and knee high boots—the epitome of a pin-up girl” (“Reconsider the Choice”; sic). This is, of course, a spot-on literal description of Wonder Woman’s body and appearance—and, admittedly, the goals of its early 1940s creators. The same minute public attention to her physical attributes has been acknowledged and reflected in the graphic novels themselves. In Greg Rucka’s Vol. 2 “The Hiketeia” (2003), Diana is mobbed outside the Themysciran embassy by fans and devotees whose sentences string together on the page, overlapping the visual image until only Diana’s full-body pose is visible: “-- want one where’s she’s smiling --” “-- so polite…” “-- what soap she uses?” The people are demanding of her and want more of her emotionally and physically until her body is all that is left of the visual and textual narrative. In Vol. 5 #9 (2016), Diana acknowledges with a slight side-eye, “There has always been an undue interest in my wardrobe,” to which her companion adds, “And your hair, they do love to wonder how you do your hair.” To the public, she is little more than her hair and her clothes, her physicality. In her own narrative, Wonder Woman is unable to escape scrutiny of her body, her clothing, and her appearance in general.
This is not a phenomenon limited to the *Wonder Woman* saga. Similar concerns have been raised about other female superheroes—Power Girl and Marvel’s Storm, for example—as well as other female pop-culture icons like *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft and *Star Wars*’ Leia Organa. Why is so much public attention placed on the spotlighted woman’s body? As defined by cultural constructs, the individual’s body becomes a space and place of ideological power. As Judith Butler asserts in *Bodies That Matter*, “[T]he fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect” (2). That is to say, the presentation of one’s body and its material context—clothing, weight, body shape, etc.—functions as a performance of one’s gender. The concept of gender is similarly understood as a culturally-constructed “historical process” through which individuals lay claim to certain kinds of power “based upon their particular type of bodies” (Bederman 7 qtd. Halberstam 49). More often than not, however, no matter the physical “type of bod[y],” a woman’s gendered body is always-already disempowered and objectified by virtue of being female. So, while the ideal male body type—muscular, active, strong—is culturally powerful, a female body fulfilling the same criteria, as Wonder Woman’s does by look (Butler’s “material”) alone, is deemed strange, uncanny, and subject to public rejection and ridicule.

The realm of comics additionally problematizes these culturally-accepted ideologies concerning gendered bodies and gendered power. As a uniquely visual genre that relies heavily on caricature and, by extent, exaggeration of reality, comics are an ideal space in which to solidify gender-normative physicality. Visual emphasis is used to reiterate the cultural norms of power and embodiment that Butler outlines: “[C]ertain body cues are extremetized to magnify the differences between men and women (e.g., body size and body shape), while others are amplified to accentuate valued gendered traits (e.g., masculinity/femininity)” (Johnson et al. 230). More
often than not those “valued gendered traits” mentioned here are mutually exclusive. Male bodies are culturally valued for their strength, size, muscle, and solidity; evolutionarily, this equates to an ability to protect and dominate (Coy et al.), recalling the patriarchal narrative’s bent toward male dominance and destruction. On the other hand, female bodies are culturally associated with nature, childbirth, and sex; the value is not in their ability to dominate but to submit physically. The caricaturing nature of comics visually emphasizes one and not the other: For example, graphic novel art tends to emphasize the waist-to-hip (WHR) ratio of female characters, giving them an exaggerated hourglass figure, at the same time that it emphasizes the waist-to-chest (WCR) ratio of male characters, resulting in an extreme “V-shaped” (popularly referred to as a “Dorito”) figure (Johnson et al. 230). Starting in the 1990s, especially, as comic sales plummeted and early social justice critique became commonplace, the comic art of Wonder Woman and other DC titles reacted with “hypergendered” visuals of “hypermuscular men and hypersexualized women” (Cocca 99): the ideologically ultimate male and ultimate female incarnate.

The hypersexualized superheroine has since become the norm in the world of graphic novels. The female character’s body and clothing are emphasized more than her heroism. A particularly Modern Age comics trend has been pinpointed as and criticized for “subject[ing] women to poses in which they flaunt their breasts, bare skin, or otherwise position themselves in a sexual manner towards the reader, no matter the action in which the female superhero is engaged” (Whaley and Wigard 205). Comics artist Mike Deodato, whose work on Wonder Woman spanned Vol. 2 #63-100 (1992-1995), is renowned for his hypersexualization of female characters, especially Diana and the Amazons. Deodato’s signature portrayal of female superheroes was coined as the “brokeback” pose: “a twisted, impossible posture allowing the reader to see all of a woman’s curves in the front and back at the same time” (Cocca 99).
Exacerbated by his emphasis on women’s (bare) legs and midriffs as well as his insistent use of pouty, erotic lips and physically impossible outfits, Deodato’s Wonder Woman, in conjunction with Bill Loebs’ writing, became known popularly as “Bad Girl” or “Porn” Wonder Woman.

These 1990s and early 2000s portrayals of hypersexualized superheroines lessened as backlash rose, but they have not disappeared. For example, recent variant covers for the 2017 Justice League film release demand very different poses of Wonder Woman’s fellow heroes in comparison to the Amazonian princess. Whereas Diana’s male counterparts (Figure 13) are shown in action and realistically proportioned, the Wonder Woman variant cover (Figure 14) shows the character contorting, frozen in action, to best show her markedly female body. Her

![Figure 13 The Flash Vol. 2 #34 (2017): Justice League variant cover](image1)

![Figure 14 Wonder Woman Vol. 5 #34 (2017): Justice League variant cover](image2)
breasts and hips are emphasized by a physically infeasible angle (a recall of Deodato’s “brokeback” pose) while, despite holding both a sword and a shield, her body and bared skin are left exposed to an in-narrative attack and the out-of-narrative male gaze. Her angle gives her a softer, more ideally “feminine” shape in comparison to the Flash’s dynamic, angular shape. In addition, Diana is the only member of the Justice League in these visuals to not be covered by substantial, head-to-toe armor.

Many critics have argued that Wonder Woman sets an example for superheroines—and everyday women as well—to be, as Sherrie Inness suggests, “little more than overly endowed male fantasies” (142) and, by extent, disempowered female characters. However, much of this argument relies on the critical assumption that comics audiences have always and continue to be predominately male. This was true, if ever, only when comic books were first hitting the scene in the 1940s and 1950s. By analyzing the boy-focused advertisements in early Wonder Woman publications, Sharon Zechowski and Caryn Neumann establish that “[b]oys were the target audience for all comic books…. Toy soldiers, tanks, ant farms, stamp collections, and muscle-enhancement products appear regularly” (138) in Golden Age-era Wonder Woman comics. Advertisements catering to female audiences were few and far between in this era, and those that did appear were focused on marriage, dating, and other gossip-related topics. This phantom “predominately male audience” that critics gesture to still to this day as the “driving economic force of the [superhero] industry” (Darowski 90), however, is statistically nonexistent. As of March 1, 2018, statistics pulled from Facebook by GraphicPolicy.com show that female readers make up 52.22% and male readers make up 44.78% of U.S. comic audiences; similar numbers (51.19%; 47.82%) from March 15, 2018, show the same trend among European comic audiences (Schenker “U.S.”; Schenker “European”). While it makes sense, then, to analyze Wonder
Woman’s earlier publications in relation to the male gaze, modern critical readings of more recent publications could rely less on analyzing the superheroine with the same assumptions from 75 years ago.

Wonder Woman’s body and identity, despite the hypersexualization of both, deconstruct normative gender expectations that demand a fixed binary of male/female. The powerful and iconic male body of patriarchal myth and media—think Hercules, Samson, Rocky, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Hulk, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson—is identifiable by its visually intrusive musculature and its potential for destructive action to obtain power. There is much about Wonder Woman's body and physicality as a graphic novel superheroine that stands in contrast to this ideologically powerful body. First and foremost, her characteristic combination of male and female gender characteristics lend her non-normative agency while her nondestructive and unashamed body and identity stand out in the common tropes of the superhero genre.

While power and dominance are the telic urge of the patriarchal narrative and are often literally realized in a male hero’s physicality, the opposite (or absence) is generally expected of a female hero. As Chuck Tate notes, gender norms and associated stereotypes function on “oppositionality … between the stereotype sets—what men have, women lack and what women have, men lack” (154). Ideological gender norms exclusively demand powerfully-built men and weakly-built women. Since the patriarchal system of these norms allows for “male toughness [to] offer[] real social power to men” (Inness 14), female toughness is threatening and pretending at male power, and, therefore, poses a serious threat to patriarchal male authority, as discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to classical and literary patriarchal narratives. These women who are aggressive, strong, and tough, are either “balanced” (Tate 155) as sexy or submissive or “snapped” (Crosby 153)—violently killed or physically weakened—in an attempt to eradicate the monstrous
feminine. In contrast to this treatment of the “tough” female character, Diana’s feminine narrative embraces her gender non-normativity. Original *Wonder Woman*’s artist Peter’s work was “crudely androgynous” (Stanley 149) while early Volume 2 (1987-2006) artists such as George Pérez, John Byrne, and Jill Thompson, regularly portrayed Wonder Woman with a bodybuilder-like physique, reversing the stereotypical feminine hourglass figure.

Throughout her narrative, Wonder Woman does more than counteract the patriarchal gender binary with just her body; her actions and words also model a non-normative feminine narrative. She combats assumptions about female bodies as objectified sexual objects by acting and speaking, but does not simply adopt a male heroic stance. What Diana *does* and *says* on a regular basis rejects the patriarchal hero narrative of destruction, dominance, and violence, and instead fully embraces a characterization and storyline that is creative, nurturing, and nonviolent even in battle. For example, while many superheroes, most notably Superman and Batman, insist on developing alter egos who serve as a respite or protection from their super selves, Wonder Woman does not. On the surface, the male heroes’ alter egos are functional and, in some cases, ineffective. Psychologically, however, Superman’s Clark Kent and Batman’s Bruce Wayne represent much more. In the case of Wayne, there is inherent violence hidden within the alternate identity that can only be released when the hero is activated. Batman is described as destructive and wild, “a kind of beast … to control” (Coogan 105 qtd. Murphy) that allows the male character to easily and surreptitiously “act out … rage” and “overcome … inhibitions and be active” (Brady 173-174 qtd. Murphy). The male alter ego seeks out to *destroy*, to eradicate the “weaker” human male in order to subsume the godlike power of the superhero. On the other side of the spectrum is Superman/Kal-El’s Clark Kent, whose weak, unconfident demeanor reveals his critique of humanity. In performing Kent, Superman rejects his godlike side (the *über*) and
instead fully embraces his human side (the mensch) at the same time that he portrays humankind as weak, soft, lesser. In both of these cases of superhuman alter egos, the male character creates a separate identity that is greater, more powerful, more destructive, in order to hide the lesser, weaker, more destructible side of their complete identities.

In contrast, Wonder Woman’s alter ego Diana Prince was left behind almost entirely following Pérez’s run in the 1980s. Originally a WWII military nurse and secretary, Diana was a plot point used to get Wonder Woman closer to her romantic interest, Steve Trevor. As it happens, however, 1940s Trevor rejects the human Diana entirely and prefers his “angel” savior, Wonder Woman. Since Pérez’s relaunch in the 1980s, Wonder Woman and Diana have been unashamedly one and the same. She is both Amazon and woman, god and human, Wonder Woman and Diana. In Brian Azzarrello’s Volume 4 (2011-2016), her transitions from humanlike Diana to godlike Wonder Woman are prompted by other divine characters’ attempts to change and control her to their liking: Hades tries to marry Diana and make her Queen of the Underworld (#9-10 (2012)); violent, power-hungry Artemis attacks Diana and figures her as fragile and human, as needing “defense -- against a god” (#12 (2012)). In both cases, Diana reveals she has no alter ego but is stronger for accepting both her godly (über) and human (mensch) sides: She tricks Hades into releasing her with a logical loophole that speaks to her nurturing, lovingly human side—“I. Love. Everyone.” (Vol. 4 #10 (2012))—and proves to Artemis that her godly powers are as accessible to her in her human body by removing her bracelets and soundly defeating the goddess in hand-to-hand combat. In 2017’s Wonder Woman, Steve Trevor and Etta Candy try desperately to make Wonder Woman “look less distracting” (i.e., less Amazon) in new clothes. When a 1910s drab woman’s two-piece suit and a pair of glasses—an homage to Marston’s Prince—do nothing to help, Etta quips: “Really? Specs? And
suddenly she’s not the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen?” In these more recent iterations, Wonder Woman and Diana are unashamedly and powerfully a single entity despite others’ best efforts. Whereas strains of toxic masculinity demand male superheroes “destroy” the weaker self, Wonder Woman embraces both her god(like) self and her human self. In interactions with others and her selves, the Amazon princess creates herself, constantly refreshing and renewing both Wonder Woman and Diana as her narrative continues.

Her multifaceted identity is one way in which Wonder Woman’s narrative deconstructs the culturally-constructed hero tale, a narrative of domination and success, both of which usually must be enacted by violence. As Hourihan notes, “… it is [the hero’s] status as a great warrior able to destroy the enemies of his people, which marks the hero out” (98). Many of Wonder Woman’s superheroine predecessors were short-lived or easily swept under the rug by publishers for adhering to this same patriarchal narrative. For example, S.M. Iger and Will Eisner’ Sheena, Queen of the Jungle (1938-1953) had dueling messages in its narrative and images: “Although she was represented as a strong and powerful female, Sheena resembled a pin-up model, designed for the male gaze” (Danziger-Russel 12). The cover of Sheena, Queen of the Jungle #1 (Figure 15) features a scantily-clad blonde bombshell pursued from behind by a virile lion, giving audiences an almost full view (but for a conveniently-placed censorial leaf) of her backside. She carries a knife and a bloodied spear, but her backward glance and impossibly twisted torso seem to make both useless. Her appropriation of the stereotypical indigenous peoples’ tools and apparel contrasted with her stark whiteness further delegitimize her power. Sheena is, as discussed above, a woman playing at a man’s role: With weapons in hand and a vicious snarl on her face, everything but her physical body reads violence, especially as directed at her animal pursuant. Because her story attempts to fulfil the heteronormative white male narrative of myth and
literature—especially Edgar Rice Burroughs *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914)—Sheena follows the trope of destructive heroic body and fails. Her recent 2017 return (Figure 16) to comics seems to have more egregiously abandoned all pretense to empowerment.

In contrast, Wonder Woman’s character rejects blatant violence and dominance and relies instead on logic, language, and hope. Instead, hers is a logic of equality that dismantles binaries instead of reifying them. The patriarchal hero singles out and discerns the foreign Other that must be destroyed for its non-normative nature. For example, Batman’s enemies, often psychologically unfit, are not nurtured back to sanity but instead subjected to abusive conditions at Arkham Asylum. Though she is visibly strong with a male-like physicality, Diana does not use violence as the hero narrative would to evince readerly admiration (Hourihan 99) or, in the case of child-focused literature, fun and entertainment (99-100). Wonder Woman’s greatest battles are often more emotional and psychological than they are physical; she aims to associate with the
unconscious and the otherness of her foe instead of eradicating it with violence. As Diana herself acknowledges, this is a predominately Amazonian philosophy: “We have a saying, my people. ‘Don’t kill if you can wound, don’t wound if you can subdue, don’t subdue if you can pacify, and don’t raise your hand at all until you’ve first extended it’” (Vol. 3 #25 (2008)). Often, when her opponent is on the ground at her feet, Diana will extend her hand to them and offer them the agency to change their mentality or their actions. She is, in all things, the avatar of peace and justice in contrast to the monomythic hero’s war and violence.

Though she is, of course, not a pacifist, Wonder Woman’s first instinct is to contend logically and psychologically with her opponent. In Vol. 2 #6 (1987), Diana combats warmongering Ares in the realm of her own soul and fights him not with her fists but with words just as she does in 2017’s *Wonder Woman*, empowering herself and humanity in the face of Ares’ destruction with her logical argumentation alone: “It is not about what they deserve. It is about what you believe. And I believe in love.” Love is Diana’s ultimate tenet, long before the sword. As she declares in Vol. 2 (1997) #119, “I am trained as a warrior … but I am trained also to think of those skills as a last resort. There is no human conflict which cannot be served better with words than with a sword.” Her logic and association with the otherness of her opponents—Baroness von Gunther and Circe’s gendered violence, Cheetah’s and Medusa’s monstrous bodies, Doctor Psycho’s perversions of reality—prompts Diana to *speak* first, fight second. More often than not, she does not kill her greatest nemeses but prompts or creates the opportunity for their psychological and mental reformation. In Marston’s Vol. 1 issues, Wonder Woman sent the villains in need of the greatest psychological nurturance and healing to Reform Island, a neighbor to Paradise Island to be nurtured by Amazonian justice, love, and support. Wonder Woman’s instinct is not to destroy, but to create—kinship, healing, association, or whatever else her foe
might need. In this way, Diana counteracts the violence and destruction of the ideological narrative of the patriarchal hero and instead represents a fresh narrative—a feminine narrative—that advocates nurturance, logic, love, and creativity long before physical action or dominance.

Wonder Woman’s body and actions rarely function as destructive or dominating forces as the bodies of the ideal male or pseudo-male do. This is not to say, however, that she is not physically powerful or strong. In fact, much of popular and critical theory alike acknowledge that Wonder Woman is the best fighter and the physically strongest member of the Justice League of America. She often spars with and even defeats Superman and has been known to fight and subdue the entire JLA at once. However, this power and heroism of both Diana’s body and mind is often categorized as the “monstrous feminine” by comic readers, writers, and characters alike. This judgment of the female hero recalls, as Sara Crosby suggests, the patriarchal condemnation of the first woman: “… like Eve, [female heroes] bear a burden of guilt. While male heroes often experience guilt, they do so because they have failed to be heroes. They commit crimes of passivity…. Tough female heroes feel guilt because of their heroism. Their agency, their toughness, is their sin” (155; emphasis original). Here, the ideological binary of man/woman is extended to a dualistic view of action and inaction, which is then equated, in a Manichean move, to good and evil. For example, in Justice League #3 (2011), when Wonder Woman makes the decision to kill the corrupt agent Maxwell Lord, whose mind control could lead Superman to destroy mankind, she is judged harshly by the world, the U.S. government, and her superhero companions. Her fellow heroes Superman and Batman condemn her initially for not upholding the moral code of the JLA: no killing. The male characters’ moral standard is one of inaction that they would have, arguably, regretted, but they expect Wonder Woman to meet—even surpass—their expectations all the same; they and other superheroes demand she feel guilty for what they
judge a crime. In contrast, however, Diana’s choice is also one of fraught and *active* heroism: She chooses to toe the line between a heroic deed—killing one man to save the greater good—and the evil act others deem as murder. While her fellow heroes construct a dualistic system of heroic/unheroic, passive/active, and good/evil, Wonder Woman troubles this starkly divided moral and heroic binary of the patriarchal male hero by performing the ideologically “monstrous feminine” as an active and moral female hero.

While Wonder Woman counteracts the figure of the male hero made canonical by the patriarchal monomyth, she also contrasts sharply with the ideological constructs of the feminine that are quintessential to that same patriarchal hero narrative. In Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, women fill one of three distinct roles that, as Hourihan asserts, “matter only insofar as their actions affect [the hero]; in their own right they are of no interest or importance” (41): mother, lover, witch, a grouping of stereotypes that similarly recalls the pagan triumvirate of the maiden, the mother, and the crone. Though these archetypes can be said to change and fluctuate in any given hero narrative, the influence of these female characters remain the same, fulfilling the hero’s need for nurturance, (romantic) reward, wisdom, or antagonism. In the patriarchal hero narrative, then, female characters tend to be bounded by narratological and ideological strictures that denote them, as the real-world interpellations of ideology do, as “subjects within patriarchy who have no access to male power and who are regulated and confined by patriarchal structures” (Halberstam 17). In this case, the patriarchal structure is the ideologically-constructed narrative of the ideal male hero. These same stereotypical patterns are visible in the female characters—super and nonsuper alike—of superhero comics.

As such, the female characters who appear in comics tend to be inexorably connected and, sometimes, subordinated to male heroes in romantic or professional (or both) relationships.
These women fall into the categories of either “super” or “non-super,” the latter most often reserved for the female characters of greater value to the hero as human and therefore weak mothers and lovers who fill the “damsel in distress” role. Those female characters who do have super powers tend to be members of conglomerate superhero teams\(^1\) (DC’s Black Canary, Zatanna, Stargirl, Starfire; Marvel’s Black Widow, Storm, Wasp, Scarlet Witch); the feminized version of a more influential male hero (DC’s Batwoman, Batgirl, Supergirl; Marvel’s Captain Marvel, Spidergirl, She-Hulk); or dangerous supervillains deemed monstrous for their power (Enchantress, Star Sapphire, Giganta, Killer Frost)—or even a combination of all three. In the first instance, the female characters are subordinates and rarely the primary focus of the heroic narrative arc; in the second two instances, we see, yet again, a narrative that shows women emulating or “playing at” male power for which they are purposefully or inadvertently punished. As Batgirl, for example, Barbara Gordon is shot in the back by the Joker in *The Killing Joke* (1988), a wound that paralyzes and relegates her body to a wheelchair and her overall role to Batman’s inspiration for vengeance. In contrast, Batman’s *Knightfall* (1993–1994) arc, in which the villain Bane breaks the hero’s back, sees the male hero summarily overcoming the pain, healing his body, and rising again to the role of ultimate antihero.

The powers of superheroines tend to be as different and as gendered as their narrative roles. Many superheroines have powers that are culturally and narratively devalued in contrast to their male counterparts. As data-analyst Amanda Shendruk notes in her study of gender representation in comics, female superheroes and -villains are “often given non-physical,\(^1\)

\(^1\) The sole exception to this rule of individual female heroes in a generally male-heavy superhero team is found in DC’s *Birds of Prey* series (1999–2018), which features an all-female vigilante group of rotating members that is currently made up of Batgirl, Black Canary, and Huntress.
thought-induced abilities”—empathy, telepathy, emotional control, illusion—and magic abilities while male superheroes lead the pack with enhanced physical abilities like super strength and invulnerability. A common power of superheroines is invisibility or the ability to render one’s self invisible via illusion, which exacerbates the disappearance and subordination of the feminine hero to the patriarchal narrative. While male heroes rely on super-objects (e.g., Batman’s suit and weapons; Green Lantern’s Power Ring; Marvel’s Thor’s hammer) that are either technologically advanced or magical, female heroes rarely have or use objects. The few exceptions, including Katana’s sword Soultaker, tend to be mundane objects with minimal enhancement of its wielder’s abilities. Instead, female hero and villain characters’ superpowers enhance their physicality and even the objectivity of their bodies. For example, DC’s Harley Quinn and Catwoman and Marvel’s Black Widow most often fight hand-to-hand with minimal or mundane weaponry (guns, oversized hammers), increasing their vulnerability and decreasing their effectiveness in contrast to power-enhanced male characters. Like their hypersexualized bodies, superheroines’ powers are codified as not male and therefore less valuable to the cultural narrative of heroism.

In the history of comics as a genre, female characters have been treated as second-class characters with limited influence or devalued narratives as well. As previously mentioned, those few superheroines who came before Wonder Woman rarely lasted an extended run of publication (see Amazona the Mighty Woman in Introduction and Sheena the Jungle Queen above). Those who were not superheroines adhered to archetypal characterizations: The 1910s and 1920s kept to portraying women as either “frumpy and domineering housewives” or sexualized “vamps” while the 1920s and 1930s gave way to female aviatrixes like Betty Lou Barnes, Peggy Mills, and Jenny Dare, whose independence was undermined by their stereotypical beauty and disappearance from comics art at the end of the war years (Inness 143).
When the 1950s’ self-censorship struck the comics industry, the superhero comic witnessed a decline in sales and the teen comic rose to replace it. Most common of these teen-focused comics were the romance comic, which, in attempting to appeal to female readers, rarely provided “the most positive role models for girls: they were often boy-crazy, shallow, and obsessed with their looks” (Danziger-Russell 14). Even these female characters’ appearances were made archetypal and easily interchangeable. Fan favorites Betty and Veronica of *Archie Comics*, for example, were barely discernible as different people with their thin frames and big eyes such that only their hairstyles and hair colors were distinguishing features (Figures 17 and 18). In adhering to the monomythic archetypes, romance comics were full to bursting with romantically-inclined female characters whose rare conflicts revolved around and were often solved by the men they loved.

Shortly after the superhero comic once again became popular in the 1960s, the romance comic
and girls’ magazine continued to target young female audiences with the latest editions of visual and ideological archetypes of feminine characters. Superhero comic *Miss America* (1944) was started by Timely Comics (later Marvel Comics) to appeal to adolescent girls, but, by its second issue, it succumbed to fashion, beauty, pop culture, and romance fiction features. Similar romanticizing moves were made with Wonder Woman at this time as well, subjecting her to the role of Steve Trevor’s love interest and the secretary of the Justice Society of America; these were the years when she had to keep her heroism quiet and unnoticeable.

Where the patriarchal hero narrative of both myth and superhero comics tend to portray female characters in ideologically archetypal roles, the same cannot be said of the *Wonder Woman* saga. First and foremost, Diana herself cannot be said to fit exclusively into any of the one-dimensional roles mentioned above. She, instead, functions as nurturer, lover, and wisdom-seeker all at once. Though she is never a literal mother, Wonder Woman enjoys the company of children and goes out of her way to protect and teach children. In 1942, her adventures take a turn to the political when she investigates the International Milk Co.’s racket, insisting that “[t]here’s nothing in the world so dear as children—I love every one of them and they all need milk, the perfect food!” (*Sensation Comics* #7). In an interlude to George Pérez’s 1980s series, as narrated by Diana’s 13-year-old friend Nessie Kapatelis, Wonder Woman is shown interacting with adults and children at the local school, teaching, learning, and sharing. In much the same way, Diana shares her wisdom and her penchant for the truth with others and has no qualms challenging individuals’ narrow or judgmental worldviews in an effort to prompt their personal growth or moral rehabilitation. At the same time that she emulates the mother- and crone-figures of the monomyth, Diana simultaneously functions as the lover—of men and humanity alike. She initiates the few romantic relationships she enters into as exemplified by her pursuit of
Steve Trevor and her many efforts to propose to and woo Tom Tresser throughout Vol. 3 (2006-2010). Similarly, she never fulfills the role of “damsel in distress”; this archetype is instead shifted to both her male and female companions. Interestingly, the *Rebirth* series actively places its Steve Trevor in this role instead and also reverses the sexualized objectification trope of comics such that he is regularly rendered seminude in action sequences. At the same time, however, he is rarely disempowered and instead aids in the rescue of others by submitting to Diana’s role as rescuer. Wonder Woman, then, rarely fulfills the singular archetypal roles of the ideological monomyth and is instead characterized as nurturer, lover, and wisdom-seeker—and more—simultaneously.

In much the same way that Diana’s character is rarely rendered unidimensional via stereotypical roles, her narrative also refrains from portraying her world and her fellow characters from a singular perspective. As Joana Russ notes in *To Write Like a Woman*, ideological culture and, by extent, cultural products adhere to an exclusive perspective: “Both men and women conceive our culture from a single point of view—the male” (81). As such, the emphasis is placed on the male protagonist’s superior actions and experiences and allows extraneous characters, especially female characters, to be characterized as flat and unidimensional, as stereotypes. The strength of the *Wonder Woman* saga, however, is its reliance on more than the just the hero’s point of view or even the male point of view. Diana tends to seek out others’ stories for a more multi-perspective narrative that contrasts sharply with the patriarchal hero’s singularly-focused narrative. In her early adventures, Wonder Woman insisted on understanding and experiencing other characters’ perspectives, especially in an attempt to reform those who were morally deficient. To teach the pampered heiress Gloria Bullfinch to respect others, especially her store employees, Diana uses her lasso to compel the woman to forget her own identity and instead
become “a poor girl looking for work” so that she can experience and understand working-class hardships (Sensation Comics #8 (1942)). Similarly, when reforming her nemesis Baroness Paula von Gunther, Wonder Woman asks the villainess to share her story. In doing so, Paula reveals that the Nazis hold her child prisoner as collateral: “I hate the Nazis with all my soul! Yet I must serve them for my child’s sake!” (Vol. 1 #3 (1943)). With this, Diana discovers that there is more to the other woman’s evil actions than mere violence or chaos; she is mother and villainess and, eventually, hero to her daughter. This penchant for multidimensional character reveals is perhaps a remnant of Marston’s own psychological work in Emotions of Normal People (1928) at the same time that it also functions to solidify more than just Wonder Woman’s character in her heroic narrative.

This multiplicity of perspective not only eradicates the presence of one-dimensional archetypal characters in the Wonder Woman saga but also further emphasizes the themes of equality, nurturance, and love that prevail in a distinctly feminine narrative like that of the Amazonian princess. By acknowledging her fellow characters and their individual points of view, Wonder Woman shows that any one perspective and, by extent, individual is as valid and valued as the rest. Though she does often have to combat villains with skewed points of view—best exemplified in Dr Psycho, who can bend others’ minds to his will and illusions—it is Diana’s ability to recognize and subsequently rationalize another’s perspective that serves as one of her greatest strengths. She nurtures the opinions and abilities of other characters, especially as one of the leaders of the Justice League of America and, when given the position upon her mother’s death (Vol. 4 #36 (2014)), as the Queen of the Amazons.

Contrary to the popular criticism, Diana’s multi-perspective narrative does not, on principle, devalue the points of view of male characters and instead insists on humanizing their
personalities as much as those of the female characters. For example, in Wonder Woman’s 2017 debut film, Diana is joined on her mission for peace by four male characters: spies Steve Trevor and Sameer; sharpshooter Charlie; and smuggler Chief. Though a common critique of the film was that Wonder Woman was the single woman in a male-dominated team, reminiscent of most superhero teams, this grouping of war-weary men provides Diana with a unique perspective on Patriarch’s World. Realistically speaking, most women who participated in WWI and WWII were stationed at home, running missions and breaking codes from afar, much like Etta Candy does in the film. By surrounding her with four significantly different male characters, the film allows Diana to experience first-hand each man’s perspective on war: Sameer reminds the princess that “not everyone gets to be what they want to be all the time” but what they must be at the time; Charlie shows her not only the effects of war and shellshock, but hope in the darkest moments; Chief, of the Blackfoot clan, demands she witness both the visible and invisible wars being waged in Man’s World when he notes that his people were killed by “[Steve’s] people” (or white Americans); and, lastly, Steve shows her the human face of war and, in doing so, challenges her own dualistic concepts of morality and justice. In witnessing these other characters’ perspectives on war and humanity, Diana learns of the weaknesses and evils of humanity as well as its strengths and its goodness. As in the Wonder Woman comics, the film portrays Diana valuing a multi-perspective narrative that emphasizes equality and truth—rather than hierarchal archetypes and dominance, as in the patriarchal hero narrative—above all else.

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14 Actor Eugene Brave Rock, a member of the Blood Tribe of Alberta, notes in an interview that Wonder Woman director Patty Jenkins gave him “unprecedented” control of the development of his character when he suggested Chief was too much of a Hollywood stock character (Friend). A key moment in the film is when Diana speaks to Chief in Brave Rock’s native Blackfoot language, acknowledging his identity and perspective, and identifies him as Blackfoot demigod and culture hero Napi.
While Thomas Young’s study of sexism in superhero comics would suggest that “[w]omen are underrepresented among comic book super-heroes … [and] generally do not play an important role in the morality drama of comic books, as illustrated by their fewer number of battles” (218 qtd. Inness 142), Wonder Woman stands as an exception to this critical assumption. As the avatar of truth and an advocate for equality and love, Diana contradicts the ideological construct that female characters have little to do with heroic morality drama. Instead, her tendency to view a situation from multiple perspectives lends her narrative not only an air of egalitarianism but also an insatiable urge to deconstruct the cultural constructs of the status quo. When the recurring villainess the Queen of Fables, a twisted conglomeration of the evil queens of fairy tales and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’s Queen of Hearts, identifies Wonder Woman as the modern-day princess character type, Diana must face her own previous iterations from the last six decades as the world’s greatest superheroine (Figure 19). At the same time, the Queen confuses her for the archetypal character Snow White, “the princess, raven hair and ruby lips,” and a woman she saves identifies her as the iconic image of a guardian angel (Vol. 3 #25 (2008)). With this, Wonder Woman is forced to interact with a multitude of unidimensional identities characteristic of the patriarchal hero tale that, as the Queen insists, “make[] a good telling.” Diana, well-versed in the plot holes and character flaws of the illusions created by both the Queen of Fables and ideology, proves that she is more than the archetypal identities the Queen attempts to force on her at the same time that she does not outright deny the perspectives others
have about her. It is these points of view—of herself and of the world—and her own equalizing acknowledgment of these multiple perspectives that lend the Amazonian princess her power to protect others. While her fellow female characters in comics are most often portrayed in stock roles that are either monomythic or narratological, Wonder Woman remains unbounded by ideological constructs and instead models a feminine narrative that nurtures equality and multiplicity of identity among its protagonist and supporting characters.

Even after 75 years of changing writers, artists, readers, and cultural contexts, Wonder Woman remains a familiar and consistent figure in superhero comics, a feat no other
superheroine has accomplished. Over the years, Diana has of course been subjected to the demands of cultural constructs and expectations on her body, her gender, her character, and her storyline, but has succeeded as a DC mainstay all the same. Though critics tend to agree that Diana’s gender performance sends mixed messages—she is “gender atypical or gender neutral” (Tate 156) such that she simultaneously “validate[s] women and undermine[s] them” (Zechowski and Neumann 135; emphasis original)—these are arguments made based on the patriarchal narrative of the hero in which the female character is always-already devalued and dominated by the male character. As argued here, however, the *Wonder Woman* saga does not function within the same ideological structures as the monomythic hero narrative. Instead, Diana's body, actions, words, and characterization all serve to simultaneously highlight and deconstruct the patriarchal order of the hero narrative such that *Wonder Woman* models a uniquely feminine narrative that counteracts cultural binaries. By analyzing how Wonder Woman interacts with and influences portrayals of the feminine in popular culture, we can highlight how Diana’s own moral character and cultural iconicity—feminism, equality, truth, justice, love, nurturance, and more—pervade her model of a feminine narrative.
Conclusion

Only a month before the release of the *Wonder Woman* film, at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, jury member and award-winning actress Jessica Chastain skewered the year’s offering of films with a feminist critique. Chastain and other female jury members such as Agnes Jaou and Fan Bingbing felt that they had faced an onslaught of male points of view and male narratives whose representations of female characters were, according to Chastain, “disturbing.” Rather than simply criticize the films, Chastain offered a remedy: “I do believe if you have female storytelling, you have more authentic female characters.” The authenticity that Chastain seeks would, as she defines it, portray women who are proactive, agented, and possessing “their own point-of-view.” Her call to see “women I recognize in my day-to-day life” asks Hollywood and popular culture in general for more realistic representations of female characters, which, Chastain argues, starts with considering the female point of view.

Whether she did so consciously or unconsciously, Chastain’s critique of the modern film industry resurrected feminist theorist Cixous’s theory of *l’écriture féminine*, which similarly highlights the feminine point of view and identity in fiction and art. In her work, Cixous demands a deconstruction of ideological concepts of narratology, language, and gender in defining woman’s writing as “an act that will … be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (351; emphasis original). Still, even now, however, many theorists, critics, readers, and more feel that this suppression of the woman’s occasion to speak continues, as evidenced by Chastain’s speech referenced above. Can the feminine ever enter history and find its voice in systems—literature, film, everyday speech—that are ideologically defined by patriarchal culture?
The *Wonder Woman* saga, as this thesis asserts, has single-handedly modelled the possibility and reality of such a feminine narrative for most of its 75-year run. Even in the face of male characters, writers, artists, and readers’ attempts to subdue and dominate her character, the Amazonian princess can be seen to question and to reject the patriarchal hero narrative in which she cannot be fit. Like Cixous’s ideal woman writer, Wonder Woman counteracts the binaries of male/female, empowered/disempowered, deconstructive/creative, dominated/subordinated, and more, and instead straddles a spectrum of identities, actions, and influences. Her feminine narrative breaks, rearranges, and reasserts itself despite ideological influences as Cixous sought for *l’écriture féminine* to do as well: “Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulatory history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield” (352). Diana, in effect, deconstructs the patriarchal male narrative—its modes of dominance, destruction, and violence—and rearranges history: the history of her influences, the history of her influence on culture, and the history of the feminine in literature. Like the Amazons of history, whose most iconic battle tactic was to play at retreat only to corral, corner, and soundly defeat their enemies (Mayor 228), Wonder Woman’s narrative acknowledges and then counteracts the patriarchal hero narrative in favor of her own more equalizing and nurturing feminine narrative.

Seemingly at the center of the gendered divide of superhero comics and popular culture is—somehow always-already—Wonder Woman, simultaneously disrupting and bridging the patriarchal cultural structure of male domination and female subordination. Diana is, like theorist Jacques Derrida’s center, “paradoxically, within the structure and outside it” (878; emphasis original): She is the ideal (American) woman, seemingly beautiful, sexualized, and subjected to the male gaze, even as she thwarts the ideological structure that demands she relinquish her power. Her early love for making games out of the threatening actions of men—
she misinterprets and enjoys being shot at, for example, as the Amazonian game bullets-and-bracelets—seems to align with Derrida’s concept of freeplay, of disorienting and playing with the central structure of male power into which she is drawn. In the character of Diana, the spectrum of the ideological gender binary is disrupted, challenged, troubled, even destabilized. While some critics construct Wonder Woman as the “mother”—the birthplace, the cradle, the womb, the center—of the modern female (super)hero, her refusal to exclusively adhere to this role and its implications unsettles and problematizes our cultural reliance on the ideological hero narrative.

This critical interpretation of Wonder Woman as the ultimate and hierarchal origin of heroinism submits other female superheroes and characters to yet another power structure they cannot surmount. Instead, it is necessary to recall that Diana, for much of her career as a superheroine, as always served as a symbol and an icon. During the 1940s, she was the American woman in wartime, resilient, strong, and resourceful in her mission “to help fight the forces of hate and oppression” that threatened America, “the last citadel of freedom, and equal rights for women” (All Star Comics #8 (1941)). Her very appearance is imbued with recognizable symbols of American culture, drawing from the red-white-and-blue and stars-and-stripes motifs of the flag and the bald eagle of military outfits. In the 1970s, feminist magazine Ms. also claimed the image of Wonder Woman as their symbol of female empowerment: “They … wanted to bridge the distance between the feminism of the 1910s and the feminism of the 1970s with the Wonder Woman of the 1940s, the feminism of their childhood” (Lepore 285). Here, as well, Diana serves as a middle ground of ideology, connecting generations of women with her narrative of feminine strength, creativity, and equality.

Wonder Woman’s own narrative has increasingly acknowledged her iconicity in popular culture. In the latest relaunch of the series, known as Rebirth, Diana is met by humanity with
open arms when she saves them from concerted terrorist attacks around the globe. Following her first act as hero, a world-wide, uncontrollable “they … finally settle[] on a name” for her; Diana’s response is simple and innocent: “I have a name” (Vol. 5 #14 (2017)). Steve Trevor lays a pile of newspapers in front of her, emblazoned with the words “WONDER WOMAN” in a multitude of languages; again, she is reborn and this time as a symbol for hope, truth, and peace. In earlier volumes, Diana also points out this canonization process, declaring that “Wonder Woman” is a symbol, a signifier, that does not equate to her own identity, her signified—“She’s not me,” she insists—to which her nemesis Circe responds, “Ah, but symbols have power, Diana” (Vol. 3 #3 (2006)). When the sorceress steals this mantle of power, she uses it to inflict violence and female domination on Man’s World in direct contrast to the nurturing and cultivating ways that Diana has always used this same empowerment. For many, Wonder Woman is an icon of female empowerment; of equality; of feminine strength; of justice and peace; of heroism.

There is, however, more to every culturally symbolic and popularly iconic superhero than meets the eye: “The heroic nature of male and female superheroes and fans’ connections to these characters through identification and parasocial interaction may inspire confidence in one’s own ability to help others and to persevere in life” (Behm-Morawitz and Pennell 86). In the case of Wonder Woman, her symbolic significance is further emphasized by the visual nature of her comic book narrative, making her as culturally recognizable as—and sometimes more so than—the heroes of patriarchal narratives. By highlighting and advocating for Wonder Woman’s deconstructive feminine narrative, we can show readers a character that represents more than the dominating and destructive heterosexual white male that reigns supreme in Western patriarchal hero stories. Diana’s kindness, love, justice, and equality represents their “shattering entry” into the history of literature and comics. In much the same way, it is necessary, as Suzanne Scott
asserts, to change the critical focus of and “future for comic book studies that creates critical intersections between the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of comics, in addition to considering the ‘who’ (audience) and the ‘why’ (economics/industry demographics).” The goal is to consider representation—the “comics and…” mentality—not only of a reader’s self and identity, but also of an individual’s ability to persevere even despite dominant ideologies and social orders and inspire themselves to also enact a deconstructive and equalizing narrative like the one that Wonder Woman models throughout her heroic saga. While this project takes on a decidedly gender-specific lens, the realm of comics allows for more perspectives that can also be applied to deconstruct the ideological hero narrative. As Arnaudo outlines:

Behind the dazzling façade of bold colors, spectacular physiques, and intense action sequences, superhero comics familiarize their audiences with a hypothetical model for a multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious society…. And the great thing is that superhero comics do not try to preach these ideas: they show them, narrate them, make them seem and feel right. (158)

With this in mind, it is possible to also contradict the patriarchal hero narrative via a multicultural lens, a queer lens, and many more literary theory lenses such that the liminal points of view in modern popular culture can be reassigned value, empowerment, and influence.

By reconfiguring Wonder Woman’s narrative as one that deconstructs rather than adheres to the dominant ideology, this thesis counteracts the patriarchal status quo of the Western hero story and asserts a model of heroism that relinquishes the ideological propensity for destruction and domination. Instead, in considering that which influenced her and that which she influenced herself, the Amazonian princess can be seen to portray a heroism that is creative, nurturing—of the self and of the Other—and equalizing. In so doing, the concept of a
feminine narrative proposed here can potentially serve to guide the development and
interpretation of heroic characters in the pages of comic books, on the silver screen, and beyond.
In analyzing the female hero in modern fantasy, Lori M. Campbell argues that “a major trait of
the female hero is the potential of her journey to inspire those with a similar need to prove
themselves or rise above subjectivities of varying kinds” (7). Like William Moulton Marston’s
declarations of future matriarchies and female strength; like the Amazons’ creative and
unconventional tactics and lives in myth and literature; like Wonder Woman’s calls for equality,
justice, and love; and like Hélène Cixous’s “beginning of a new history, or rather a process of
becoming in which several histories intersect with one another” (352), Campbell’s description of
the symbolic power of the female hero does not exclude any demographic of reader, writer, artist,
or hero from seeking inspiration. Ultimately, then, the feminine hero narrative that Diana
models is one of equality and nurturance rather than the dominance or definitive binaries most
common in the superhero narratives of her genre. As in her origin story, Wonder Woman
refuses to be shaped by the material—whether clay or patriarchal ideologies—from which she is
sculpted, but instead discovers power and agency for herself and for others in modeling a
uniquely deconstructive and empowering feminine narrative.

As much of gender studies notes, the oppression of women based on gender is not
biological; it is a social and therefore changeable position. Wonder Woman’s creator not only
knew this but carried it as his most basic tenet. Marston insisted that his superhero comics were
meant as “psychological propaganda for the new type of women who should … rule the world”
(qtd. Lepore 191). The Amazonian princess was meant to appeal to boy and girl child readers
alike while Marston’s rewrite of normative power dynamics in favor of a feminine narrative lent
power to both. Despite slight hiccups following his death, Marston’s Wonder Woman continues
to shine through 75 years later: “She is a long-standing symbol of female independence and
gender equality in a popular culture dominated by male characters and patriarchal narratives”
(Zechowski and Neumann 133). Though it must be noted that Diana generally represents an
ideal woman—young, white, (sometimes) heterosexual, beautiful and buxom—it is still
significant that her narrative offers power to herself, other characters, and readers, by nature of
being feminine and deconstructive of the patriarchal order. By flouting both the patriarchal
system and its gender binaries, Wonder Woman asks readers and characters alike to reimagine
our narratives of heroism. As popular comic theorist and writer Gail Simone once declared,
“When you need to stop an asteroid, you get Superman. When you need to solve a mystery, you
call Batman. But when you need to end a war, you get Wonder Woman” (qtd. Richard 123).
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