



December 2018

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Morris, Hanann (2018) "Wonder Woman's Fight for Autonomy: How Patty Jenkins Did What No Man Could," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol11/iss2/12>

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wonder woman's fight for autonomy

How Patty Jenkins Did What No Man Could

Hanann Morris

Perhaps the most recognized comic superheroine of all time, Wonder Woman's many adaptations have sparked controversy among readers, feminists, and scholars in a debate that continues seventy-five years after her creation. Originally created to empower women, Wonder Woman has fluctuated between a champion of social justice and a dehumanized sexual object. She was the second superheroine to have her own comic, the first to stay in print until current day, and the first to have her own major motion picture. Yet the majority of her adaptations have shaped her into an object of male sexual gratification and submission with one exception—the 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins, the only film that gave Wonder Woman a voice.

Wonder Woman was born under possibly the most feminist of circumstances for 1940 America. The creator, William Marston, was known to have said, "In a thousand years women will rule this country." Marston was surrounded by feminist influence. His lover was Olive Byrne, niece to Margaret Sanger, the feminist who gave women contraception and Planned Parenthood. Marston was selected by All-Star (the predecessor to DC Comics) to solve the backlash the comic was facing over its "blood-curdling masculinity." Marston decided the best way to fend off critics would be to create a female

superhero. He wanted a heroine who would be, “a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood.” A heroine who would combat the idea that women were inferior to men and inspire them to greater self-confidence and achievement in male-dominated athletics. From all these dreams sprang Wonder Woman. In her first appearance she is a strong, manly looking woman, with large arms and the body type of Rosie the Riveter (figure 1). She wears a patriotic outfit, complete with a star-spangled skirt and carries The Lasso of Truth, which was no surprise, considering Marston was the inventor of the lie detector. She is an active character who likes to play baseball and starts her own fitness club. She is intelligent, she’s a scientist and she’s a leader, even running for president and winning.

Considering all this, Marston’s Wonder Woman seems the perfect example of female empowerment. And yet, not everything Marston did lined up perfectly with what he said. Marston shocked Americans when he claimed that all women enjoy submission, particularly in sexual ways. He believed man’s need for dominance was toxic, whereas woman’s ability to submit to loving authority would lead America into a peaceful utopia, much like Wonder Woman’s island of Themyscira.

While many Americans were not on board with his sexually submissive ideologies, Marston found a way to spread his beliefs in the form of entertainment. In comic after comic, Wonder Woman finds herself in submissive positions. She is bound, gagged, chained, lassoed, and manacled (figure 2). Her Lasso of Truth was actually originally created by Marston to force others into submission, rather than truth extraction. Marston often gave H.G. Peter, Wonder Woman’s illustrator, detailed instructions of exactly how Wonder Woman was to be chained. One of his instructions read, “Do some careful chaining here—Mars’s men are experts! Put a metal collar on Wonder Woman with a chain running off from the panel, as though she were chained in the line of prisoners. Have her hands clasped together at her breast with double bands on her wrists” (Jett).

Clearly, there is more going on in Marston’s description than a simple capture or escape plot device. Marston’s writings repelled many feminist readers, including Josette Frank, a leader of the Child Study Association. She did not appreciate what she called, “The sadistic bits showing women chained, tortured, etc.” And she was not alone in her opinions. Fans also reported disturbance with Wonder Woman’s chains. When Dorothy Roubicek, an editor of Wonder Woman, objected to Wonder Woman’s torture, Marston replied

to his superiors, "Of course I wouldn't expect Miss Roubicek to understand this. After all I have devoted my entire life to working out psychological principles. Miss Roubicek has been in comics only six months or so, hasn't she?" (Lepore). Roubicek may have only been in comics for six months, but she was still a woman, something Marston, for all his feminist qualifications, was not. Yet Marston did not listen to her, instead claiming he knew what women wanted better than they did themselves. Marston may have believed women were superior, but he believed their superiority came from their ability to nurture, to protect, and to act as moral forces (Buchanan). When Marston's Justice Society offers Wonder Woman a position on their team, it was a secretary position. Wonder Woman is of course thrilled to stay behind, while the other superheroes go off to fight the Nazis. Thus, Wonder Woman's feminist creator placed his superheroine on the sidelines, effectively making Wonder Woman unable to obtain the right to individual conscience and judgment, but instead giving her the role of upholding the characteristics that men believed best suited a "powerful" woman.

While Marston had his flaws, he still portrayed Wonder Woman as a smart, active woman, who could do many things stereotypically attributed to men. However, upon Marston's death in 1947, things went further downhill for Wonder Woman. Fredric Wertham, a prominent psychiatrist, stripped Wonder Woman of her active role by protesting against comic books to the U.S. Senate, claiming their violent depictions harmed children. Wertham acknowledged that many were calling Wonder Woman an advancement of femininity, but responded that there were no activities in Wonder Woman that depicted this advancement. To the Senate, he said, "[Women] in comics do not work. They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent. Even when Wonder Woman adopts a girl there are lesbian overtones" (Lepore). His attack on women in comics led the Comics Magazine Association of America to adopt a new code in 1954. The code stated, "There can be nothing unconventional depicted in comics. The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage" (Chambliss). Thus, the Golden Age of comics transitioned into the Silver Age—with depictions of women in roles as wives and homemakers. Robert Kanigher, who replaced Marston, created a Wonder Woman whose primary concerns centered around her marriage to Steve Trevor, rather than helping those who could not help themselves. Wonder Woman went from her job as Justice Society secretary to a job as

editor of a Hopeless Hearts column, giving advice to heartbroken couples. Steve Trevor became a more dominating figure in her life, forcing Wonder Woman to marry him in one comic by using her magic lasso of submission, completely destroying Wonder Woman's freedom to choose for herself. This powerlessness continued when Mike Sekowsky came on board in 1968 and completely removed Wonder Woman's powers, getting rid of her iconic spangled outfit and giving her the role of fashion designer, so that she could live in America and marry Steve Trevor. Despite these many different creators, one thing remained the same—Diana still managed to be continually tied up and gagged in comic after comic.

Another attribute of Wonder Woman that remained constant throughout her adaptations was her power to control men with her body. While Wonder Woman's outfits have changed drastically through the years, their sex appeal has not. After Marston's death, Wonder Woman's outfit became more feminine, her boots replaced with ballet slippers and her hair pulled back more conservatively. As time passed, her skirt transitioned into a swimsuit, riding up higher and higher on her thigh. Her legs gradually lengthened, her waist shrunk, and her breasts enlarged, but her swimsuit remained the same size—extra small. Different versions of Wonder Woman show her in even more compromising attire. For example, in the late 1990s, she changed into an all-black biker girl bikini. In the 1967 TV pilot version of *Wonder Woman*, Diana dons a more modest outfit, but is still consumed by vanity, taking an entire minute of screen time to preen in front of a mirror. Throughout the comics, Wonder Woman often wears these sexualized outfits while standing, sitting, and jumping in positions that most women would never find comfortable but look good to the male viewer. Objectification of women in media is sometimes referred to as "the male gaze." This term was developed by feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey, who described the male gaze as the "act of depicting the world and women in the visual arts and in literature from a masculine point of view, which present women as objects of male pleasure" (Eaton). The male gaze is well known in comics and Wonder Woman is no exception. The United Nations recognized this objectification when they appointed Wonder Woman as an honorary ambassador to challenge female stereotypes. A petition was started by concerned members of the U.N., who thought Wonder Woman's hyper-sexualized attire only contributed to the objectification of women. The petition read:

Although the original creators may have intended Wonder Woman to represent a strong and independent 'warrior' woman with a feminist message,

the reality is that the character's current iteration is that of a large breasted, white woman of impossible proportions, scantily clad in a shimmering, thigh-baring bodysuit, with an American flag motif and knee-high boots—the epitome of a pin-up girl. (Roberts)

Wonder Woman was removed soon after from her honorary position.

Despite good intentions to make Wonder Woman more of a role model for women, Wonder Woman has rarely had an actual female creator. While many men have tried and in several cases succeeded to make her a feminist icon, rarely has Wonder Woman had a female voice depict her. Of the forty-five writers on Lynda Carter's live action TV series *Wonder Woman*, only six were women. And out of the twenty-two directors, zero were female. Cathy Lee Crosby's Wonder Woman movie, which preceded Lynda Carter, also featured an all-male crew. Out of the thirteen cartoon films that feature Wonder Woman, Lauren Montgomery is the only female creator. In her seventy-five years at DC comics, Wonder Woman has had only four female writers—Mindy Newell, Trina Robbins, Jodi Picoult, and Gail Simone, with Simone being the longest female writer—a grand total of three years. Before the 2017 Wonder Woman film, Lauren Montgomery was the only female director. Under her direction, Wonder Woman is still ogled in her tiny outfit by Steve Trevor who later stumbles upon her naked bathing friends, showing that Montgomery was most likely appeasing a predominantly male audience. Unfortunately for her female fans, Wonder Woman's voice is more often than not a man's voice. And according to feminist leader, Elizabeth Stanton, "A woman's independence must come through herself" (Freedman). For Wonder Woman to be a truly independent role model for women, her voice needs to be a woman's voice.

That is harder said than done. In 2014, eighty-five percent of all films made in Hollywood had no female directors, eighty percent had no female writers, and ninety-two percent had no female cinematographers (Lang). With so few females on set, the male gaze is often a consequential outcome. For example, Joss Whedon, the famed feminist creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the writer for *The Avengers*, created a Wonder Woman script eleven years before Patty Jenkins, a script that fortunately never saw the light of day. Despite intentions to create a strong heroine in his script, Whedon has Diana walk onto the dance floor of a crowded bar and do a seductive dance to the pleasure of all male viewers. In describing the dance, Whedon

writes, "Diana moves her legs back and turns fluidly, a curve rippling up her body as she fold into a dance that is sensual, ethereal, and wicked sexy." Two male characters, Griffen and Ben, watch Diana, enraptured, saying, "It's like Christmas." After the dance is over, Diana is allowed into a private room where we meet the god Bacchus who says to Diana, "I like that you knew you needed to dance for me. For a girl who's never seen soul train, you know how to bend a bit." While reading the description of Diana's dancing, it is easy to picture her moving hips, but what about her face? In Whedon's script, Diana has been reduced to the epitome of the male gaze. Her body gives her access to Bacchus, who gives her validation. Had this script been used for the 2017 film, *Wonder Woman* would have been a reincarnation of Marvel's *Black Widow* and would have become an object, giving up her individual conscience and judgement in exchange for male objectification.

In philosophy, an object does not have a real existence independent of the subject who observes it. A subject, however, is a being who has a unique consciousness and unique personal experiences. Unfortunately, women in media are continually shown as objects, gaining freedom and independence only at the hands of men. Yes, men are objectified in media as well, but more often than not, these men are shown in full form with complete awareness of their presence, unlike women who are often shown with heads missing or from the back, in dehumanizing ways. According to journalist, Shannon Ridgway, objectified men often seem to be saying, "Come hither; look what I can give you," while objectified women seem to be saying, "This is yours for the taking" (Ridgway).

The *Wonder Woman* comics are full of images that objectify. George Perez, while credited as the man who returned *Wonder Woman's* original powers, still constantly surrounded her with men spending more time talking about her figure than listening to what she had to say. In John Byrne's edition, *Wonder Woman* is a smart, mature, intelligent woman, who for some uncharacteristic reason, thinks it is completely appropriate to seductively change clothes in front of Cassandra Sandsmark, a teenage girl who sits back and enjoys the show. A few pages later, the Flash runs around *Wonder Woman* so fast she cannot run away—at least not until he has planted a kiss on her surprised face. No consent—just a shocked look from *Wonder Woman*.

Why does this matter? Because the objectification of women in film can lead to the objectification of women in real life. Objectification of women in real life can lead to inappropriate comments and lack of consent. Lack of

consent from women can lead to sexual harassment charges. Sexual harassment can lead to attempted or completed rape. Studies have found that when men and women are exposed to sexually explicit media, “Both groups had less progressive views of gender roles” (Kimmel, Linders). Another study found that both men and women consumers of media that depicted women as objects were less likely to support women’s rights after viewing (Laier, Pawlikowski, Pekal, Schulte, Brand). Watching scene after scene of women in submissive roles makes the submission seem normal and sets the stage for “lopsided power dynamics in couple relationships and the gradual acceptance of verbal and physical aggression against women” (Stoner, Hughes).

We see this kind of aggression play out in modern society constantly. On October 5th, 2017, the New York Times published an exposé revealing decades of Harvey Weinstein’s acts of sexual assault on Hollywood actresses and subsequent cover ups. What followed became known as the “Weinstein effect,” a global trend of sexual harassment accusations made against predominantly famous figures. The hashtag #MeToo became a sudden haven for sexual assault victims to report their incidents in safety. Silent victims who had suffered psychological trauma for years, including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, weight loss, nausea, lowered self-esteem, and sexual dysfunction finally had an outlet for their pain. And yet, many still remain in silence. According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) only 310 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police. Perhaps, if our media showed women as independent and empowered, we could prevent many sexual harassment cases rather than deal with the destructive aftermath.

But who can blame men? Boys will be boys. Especially when the media supports this commonly used idiom. Take Harrison Ford’s older movies. In *Blade Runner*, Harrison Ford slams the door on his love interest, shakes her, presses her up against a window, and orders her to tell him to kiss her. In *Indiana Jones*, Ford uses his whip to pull a fleeing woman back toward him and kisses her. In one of the most beloved films, Ford takes Princess Leia by the hand (she tells him to stop), he says she needs more scoundrels in her life (she begins to protest), he pushes her against the wall and kisses her. Now, of course, she falls in love with him. These images of the handsome hero who always gets the girl can negatively impact viewers into devaluing individual conscience. Research shows viewing film can change our perceptions, which “can alter beliefs and attitudes related to particular moral issues” (Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, Grizzard). Researchers Millburn, Mather,

and Conrad found that exposing men to sexually objectifying media clips made them less likely to express empathy toward a hypothetical rape victim. And in 2012, Rudman and Mescher found that men who viewed images of objectified women were more likely to endorse sexual violence against women. The United States sexual harassment laws are clear: Non-consensual sexual contact is harassment. However, consent in romance movies is often seen as unromantic and emasculating.

But, consent does not have to be a verbal “can I kiss you on the mouth?” dialogue. In the newest Wonder Woman movie, directed by Patty Jenkins, Wonder Woman and Steve put hands on each other’s faces, signaling their mutual consent and a kiss soon follows. Before this moment, Steve and Wonder Woman had several emotional and intellectual connections, unlike other movies such as *Rush* where the couple skip the “mind” connection and go straight to the physical. In this consensual scene, Jenkins reveals herself as a director who wants her female characters to be subjects, not objects.

Out of all the Wonder Woman installments, only one director has truly liberated Wonder Woman as an autonomous female role model. *Wonder Woman* 2017 shattered records, becoming the first female-led superhero film in more than a decade and the first superhero film to be directed by a woman. Wonder Woman was the first female superhero to get her own movie in either of the shared DC and Marvel universes, and Jenkins was the second female director to make a movie with a budget of more than \$100 million (Kathryn Bigelow being the first). Jenkins also now holds the record for the largest opening of all time for a female director, with *Wonder Woman* taking in an estimated \$100.5 million, and is the highest grossing film directed by a woman, taking in \$800 million. Across the world, women watched *Wonder Woman* take to the big screen, watching a powerful feminist symbol that wasn’t kinky or objectifying. On the mythical island, Jenkin’s Amazons are leaders rather than sexualized lovers of submission who are constantly bathing and wearing seductive clothing. Jenkins made sure to hire real-life wrestlers, crossfit champions, trainers, farmers, and Olympic athletes for her Amazons. When creating *Wonder Woman* herself, Jenkins said, “I followed the rules that I believe in: *Wonder Woman* doesn’t hurt people for fun. She doesn’t use violence unless she has to, and when she has to, she’s incredibly adept” (Cornish). Jenkins went on to explain that being tough did not mean Diana could not be loving, funny, and warm. Jenkins wanted a woman who was not dummied down version of a man, but an independent capable

woman who believes in justice as well as love. If you watch closely in the film, you will see Wonder Woman using the non-fatal handle of her sword to hit Germans and breaking guns rather than faces. Patty Jenkins showed her millions of viewers that her Wonder Woman could combine the good traits of the old Diana, a warm hearted, peace loving goddess with a warrior who actually went to the front lines, rather than staying home as the secretary.

While William Marston, George Perez, and Joss Whedon had good intentions, the problem is they are not women. Of course, men can be incredible champions of women's rights and creators of female icons. However, the most authentic depictions come from those who experience what it means to be a woman firsthand. Just as a story of racism written by a black man is more believable than a story of racism written by a white man, a story of what it means to be a strong woman is more convincing when written by a strong woman—and Patty Jenkins is a strong woman. Her previous film, *Monster*, won an Oscar for best actress. She is a woman who cares about politics, history, and her children, taking off several years of film making to be a full-time mom.

Perhaps Jenkins's greatest triumph takes place during the halfway point of the movie when Wonder Woman has to decide whether or not she will charge into No Man's Land. All around her are defeated men, unable to fight, telling Diana that she cannot save the women and children, that it is "impossible." Instead of listening to the voices that want to shape her, Diana sees that helping those who cannot help themselves is her purpose. She removes her heavy coat that has been hiding her body, but instead of the camera focusing on her sexualized body parts with a roaming male gaze, the camera focuses instead on her shield, her boots, her lasso, all of which resemble armor, rather than the popular bathing suit outfit. Finally, Diana emerges fully from the trenches, an independent subject rather than a sexualized object. She is not using her body to please a male character, she is using her body to save others on her terms. And unlike her secretary position in Marston's comics, she is on the front lines, leading the men to victory. And when Diana kisses Steve Trevor in Jenkin's film, it is not in the first few minutes of the movie, but waits until emotional and intellectual connection has been established. When the kiss arrives, each character places a hand on other's face, signaling consent. Quite a bit different than Byrne's Flash imprisoning Diana with speed until he gets an unexpected and unwanted kiss.

Of course, nothing is perfect. Joss Whedon was hired to write the script for the 2017 Justice League film and like his *Wonder Woman* script, Diana loses much of what makes her a unique, warm, self-governing leader. Whedon and director Zack Snyder returned Diana to the sexualized version, with outfits revealing Diana's cleavage and "male gaze" shots that highlight her buttocks and breasts. In *Justice League*, Wonder Woman reacts, rather than acts, letting her emotional attachment to Steve Trevor drive her actions, rather than acting for herself and defending those who cannot defend themselves. And just like in John Byrne's comic, the Flash uses his speed to land on top of Wonder Woman in a sexually suggestive position. Though he quickly jumps off, Diana does not seem upset, but smiles, effectively ruining her mature and powerful image and reducing her to the object she was in Byrne's comics.

Jenkins was able to capture the true spirit of Wonder Woman seventy-five years after her original creation (out of pure coincidence, Jenkin's last day of filming was on William Marston's birthday) (figure 5). Jenkins's Wonder Woman had a lot of chances to fail, but she didn't. Wonder Woman could have taken the Joss Whedon route and been another sexualized Black Widow; instead, Wonder Woman gave us what so many feminists had been hoping for, for so long—an independent heroine. Women and men have fallen in love with the ideals Wonder Woman possesses, ideals that are universal to gender. Her leadership, her bravery, her compassion are all; characteristics that inspire both genders alike. And you know what the best part of Jenkin's film was? Wonder Woman was never tied up! Instead, Jenkins created a heroine who was an independent subject. Perhaps this depiction will pave the way for more and more strong female characters, until it becomes normal to see women in non-objectified roles. And just like how smoking in film has been deemed no longer cool, perhaps sexual harassment will lose its appeal to the media, thus decreasing the likelihood of harassment taking place in real life.

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