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### Misogyny Man: Sexism in the Superhero Genre

#### Abstract

Superhero comic books have been popular for years, and with this popularity unfortunately comes the oversexualizing and misrepresentation of female heroes. As more comic book heroes and heroines make their way into film and television, this problem becomes even more apparent. Some may argue that times have changed since superhero comics first emerged, and yet the ratio of heroes to heroines remains uneven, with the few female heroes still lacking in character development and costuming. Many of these “strong” female characters seem to be having trouble escaping worn-out tropes assigned to their gender, while male heroes’ popularity soars to new heights with each new character. My essay examines superheroines’ cartoon representations and their development from page to screen; I add my voice to Jeffrey Brown, Carol Stabile, and others in the discussion of superheroines and women in general, and how they can and ought to be taken as seriously as males, ‘super’ or not.

#### Days of Heroes Past

Holy feminism, Batman! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s... another male superhero? Superheroes --whether in comics, television, or film-- have been popular for decades. Since the early 2000s, Marvel Studios has released a large array of movies based on their comic book

heroes, such as Iron Man, Captain America: The First Avenger, and Thor, and characters like Batman, Superman, and the X-Men have captured the attention of millions of fans, providing action and adventure through unique and diverse storylines. Of the dozens of superhero movies created by Marvel, there has yet to be a single movie titled and based on a female character. Marvel has, of course, included women in their movies, such as Pepper Potts, Jane Foster, and Natasha Romanoff or the Black Widow—all of whom either began as or became a main character's love interest. DC Entertainment, another big name in the superhero genre (comic and film alike), has also produced several superhero films and shows, such as the Batman and Superman franchises, and the series *The Flash* and *Arrow*. Again, not one of these series' lead characters is female. When heroines (super or not) are featured in media, they are often written as two-dimensional characters whose main purpose is to be pleasing to the eye, or to be rescued by the hero. Even Black Widow, a highly trained assassin and member of the Avengers, has had her combat skills and intelligence trivialized in favor of highlighting the tightness of her costume and her waist-to-hip ratio. The issue with the common representation of superheroines is that they are almost always reduced to tropes, such as “damsels in distress” or “femme fatale,” and are not given enough character to make them seem realistic, but are instead oversexualized and objectified. The lack of respect given to these characters reflects how real women are viewed: a man can be seen and accepted to be superhuman in fiction, while real women struggle to be seen as even human. In order to represent strong female characters, the superhero genre must depart from the tired tropes and be taken seriously first as human beings as well as superheroines.

#### Marvel and DC: Black Widow and Wonder Woman

The progression of superheroines since their origins in comic books can be seen by looking at recent popular leads from Marvel and DC. The increasingly popular and recently

controversial character of Black Widow portrays some of this growth. From *Iron Man 2* to *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Natasha Romanoff or Black Widow has “developed” from sexy secretary to sexy spy, using her combat skills, spy intellect, and feminine physique to destroy villains of all kinds. Unfortunately, she has not been able to progress far out of the femme fatale trope without her own movie or even a complete backstory. A glimpse of her past is given in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, with a brief introduction to her training in the “Red Room” during her early life in Russia. This quick backstory, however, is used to weaken her character and is even manipulated into fueling her relationship with Bruce Banner, or the Hulk, a relationship that, until *Age of Ultron*, was not hinted at in previous films. These flashbacks brought on by the Scarlet Witch--only the second superheroine to join the Avengers movies--have led to more controversy over the character, namely the fact that Romanoff refers to herself as a monster because she is unable to bear children. Romanoff opens up to Banner on a more personal level than she has ever done before, and her interaction with him elaborates on her so-called ‘monstrosity’:

Banner: “There’s no future with me. I can’t ever... I can’t have this. Kids. Do the math, I physically can’t.”

Romanoff: “Neither can I. In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised, um... They have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It’s efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier. Even killing. You still think you’re the only monster on the team?” (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*)

This dialogue first insults real women who cannot produce children, implying that Black Widow’s and other women’s worth lies in reproduction. Romanoff’s monstrosity is attributed to

her barrenness; Banner's monstrosity, on the other hand, lies in his uncontrollable anger that forces him to turn into a literal monster. This attempt to relate the two characters fell flat for many viewers. It has taken Romanoff several movies to be considered a serious member of the Avengers only to be brought down by poor writing and thinly veiled stereotypes. Chris Evans and Jeremy Renner, two actors from the Avengers franchise, made recent statements insulting Black Widow, calling her a slut for flirting with the other characters (Schedeen). Renner later apologized for his statements, but his wording on social media and television implied he was not entirely regretful about his words concerning the fictional character: "I am sorry that this tasteless joke about a fictional character offended anyone. It was not meant to be serious in any way. Just poking fun during an exhausting and tedious press tour" (Stewart). While not insulting Scarlett Johansson (Black Widow's actress) directly, one might wonder just how much respect these actors may or may not have for their female costars.

Actors' opinions aside, Black Widow's appearance alone attests to the objectification that runs rampant in this genre. Her official costumes have always been skin-tight body suits, complete with a revealing V-neck zipper, accenting the character's curves and leaving little to the imagination. While most of the heroes' suits are built around convenience and mobility, covering their whole bodies in flexible materials and/or protective armor, Black Widow continues fighting alongside them in heels and leather. She almost always has pristine hair and makeup, while her team mates are beaten, bloodied, sweaty, and disheveled—as if suggesting that only men can handle a physical fight, or that even if a woman is able to fight, she must not appear to have been. Meanwhile, scenes portraying Black Widow in pain or under pressure include her tied to a chair in a short black dress, or lying directly under Bruce Banner in a suggestive manner. As capable as they try to make Black Widow appear, at the end of the day, it

is her looks that seem to matter: the preservation of her 'deadly' feminine physique. This stereotype is popular with audiences as long as it can be used to objectify the characters. Once the superheroine accepts and utilizes her sexuality, though, she is then considered dangerous and is labeled a 'slut' or 'tease.' For most fans, superheroines are certainly allowed and even desired to be sexual, only so long as the heroine doesn't consider it a strength of her own.

Like Black Widow, DC's superheroine Wonder Woman seems to be judged solely by her appearance and not her skill or strength. Unlike Black Widow, however, Wonder Woman will be the first superheroine to be featured in her own movie in 2017, and will lead the way for Marvel's superheroine-led film *Captain Marvel* in 2018. The upcoming *Wonder Woman* film is generating some controversy, some of which is centered on the film's former director Michelle MacLaren and her replacement Patty Jenkins (Dockterman). Victoria Ingalls' work in evolutionary psychology shows that there is a difference between female characters written by men compared to ones written by women. According to Ingalls, William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, "believed that women were superior to men" and wanted to portray this in his comics (Ingalls 210-211). Unfortunately, despite all of Wonder Woman's strengths, she, too, has fallen victim to objectification. There is hope, however, that the film's female director will positively affect Wonder Woman's portrayal. Aside from the director drama, there is also a heavy focus on and dissatisfaction with the actress' appearance. Many fans are frustrated with the casting choice of Gal Gadot, the Israeli actress that will portray the Amazonian heroine. Much of the argument is over whether or not her body type fits the character: is the actress too skinny? Does she have enough muscle? Is she curvy enough? Very little attention has been paid to whether or not Gadot will accurately portray the character's personality or skills, choosing instead to focus on her physical appearance instead of her talent.

Wonder Woman was originally portrayed in a star-spangled and gold unitard, accenting her curves as well as muscles, but it is hard to see the character as a feminist icon when she is portrayed in such a sexist manner. DC's rendition of her costume in the upcoming film is slightly toned down in color, but stays mostly true to the original design by leaving most of her skin uncovered. It is a step up from the costume from the 1970s television show, which featured an improbable waistline plus emphatic curves, but one may question whether the accuracy of the costume is worth the objectification of the character, and in turn, her actress.

### The Problem(s)

The issue with current female representation in media deals with quality as well as quantity. For the handful of popular superheroines present in films, shows, and comics, the problem lies in how they are portrayed, not simply how *many* are portrayed. Including a few token females, such as the Avengers Black Widow, the Justice League's Wonder Woman, or Lady Sif from *Thor*, is a good start, but they have yet to balance out the remaining male cast in both number and characterization. Included women should be written with as much care, respect, and attention to detail as the male characters, instead of focusing on how they look or what they wear. Despite the progress that has been made since comic books first originated, superheroines are still portrayed in an unsettlingly sexist manner. At this point in time, the inequality between the genders is shrinking, and yet there is still an obvious gap in the respect a superhero receives compared to a superheroine. Many writers and producers seem incapable of envisioning a strong hero and a strong heroine existing in the same story without competition or degradation. A strong heroine ought not threaten a hero; the fact that she is a woman has no effect on the hero's masculinity or power. And, the idea that a superheroine must become romantic partners with the superhero is becoming outdated. A romantic or physical attraction by itself is not a negative trait,

but using it to weaken a heroine's character while strengthening a hero's is old and tired. Heroic characters should be well-rounded, emotional, and realistic, and their interactions with one another should be realistic. Using a heroine as nothing but a romantic plot device must stop if heroines are ever to be taken seriously.

The underlying cause of these issues in the superhero genre stems from the modern, flawed opinion of women. Stabile states in her article that "we can imagine that men can fly, but not that a woman can and should be able to protect themselves" (Stabile 90). American culture's "depiction of women in the media is so grounded in eroticism and objectification [that] it is difficult to conceive of them in different terms" (Brown 13). Superheroines are displayed in such a way as to highlight their physical appearance as their only important quality, leaving the brawn and brains to the lead hero. Men are deemed the saviors; women, the victims. No matter the heroine's skills, intelligence, or even beauty, she simply does not measure up to the hero who swoops in to save the day and the girl. In the super world, women are damsels to be saved, prizes to be won, and possessions to be protected—accessories to the hero's fame. Even when women's strength is taken into consideration, strong characters such as Gamora from Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* still have trouble escaping these tropes. Gamora is an example of slight departure from the typical representation of superheroines. Although extremely skilled and fiercely independent (and quite green), Gamora is still thin, beautiful, and eventually rescued by the main hero. Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz conducted a study on the effects victimized and oversexualized heroines had on a female audience. These characters elicited a negative response in the audience, with many comparing themselves to the heroines and becoming discouraged (Behm-Morawitz and Pennell 219). When heroines are inaccurately and disappointingly portrayed, real women are the first to be affected and disappointed in turn.

With the lack of heroine representation comes a lack of heroine merchandise. Mark Ruffalo, who plays Bruce Banner/the Hulk in the Avengers films, was recently seen on Twitter asking marketing companies to produce “more Black Widow merchandise for [his] daughters and nieces. Pretty please” (Stewart). Whenever the Avengers are assembled in toys, posters, clothing, etc., Black Widow is often omitted from the ensemble. This spotlights a major flaw in the superhero genre’s marketing: not including their female characters. The creators of much of this merchandise defend their actions by claiming that young girls do not purchase superheroes; they purchase princesses, and that is not what they are selling (Rodriguez). Young girls and women are denied access to merchandise of their heroines simply because they do not fall into the target audience and supposedly prevent the creators from making more money. This suggests that maybe the heroines aren’t as important as the heroes, and that maybe women aren’t worth marketing to. This idea can negatively affect young girls’ self-esteem, and may discourage their interest in the superhero genre, thus encouraging companies not to market to the remaining females fans.

### Success in Spite of Sexism

Many fans of the superhero genre argue that the need for strong heroines does not exist. They are content with the female characters they are given, even using the excuse that a film or television heroine should be portrayed in a sexist manner because that is how they were first created. Some media ‘purists’ ignore the glaring sexism in the genre in favor of this so-called accuracy, and sometimes even complain if a more modest film iteration surfaces, simply because it departs from the canon. Other fans partake in this genre *because* of the sexy superheroines: “sex sells” still remains a popular marketing scheme. These characters embody the ideal super woman: perfect figure, tight and revealing outfits, and powerful—but not as powerful as the male



hero. Many fans could care less if the character is realistic; they are not looking for reality. Still others will point out how well the movies do without the heroines; the male-led movies alone make enough money, so they argue there is no need to branch out. I am a member of a DC vs. Marvel fan page on a social media site, and I recently witnessed a discussion following the question “should Black Widow get her own movie?” Most of the answers were ‘no;’ some had legitimate reasons as to why not, such as how her backstory has already been explained, while others did not give reasons. However, one member said ‘yes;’ as long as the movie starred him and Scarlett Johansson and appeared on the pornography site Pornhub (a sentiment shared by other members, as well). This example of pure misogyny shows a more extreme view of superheroines, but it is a mindset that is shared by many. Unfortunately, we will not know how successful a superheroine movie will be until one is finally produced: 2017’s *Wonder Woman* will hopefully provide some positive feedback. In addition to this movie, CBS’ series *Supergirl*, and Marvel’s *Jessica Jones* have recently aired, joining Marvel’s *Agent Carter* for a total of three female-led shows; while this is a step in the right direction, the shows are still disappointingly outnumbered. *Agent Carter* almost did not receive a second season because it was not as popular as male-led shows, which returns to the issue of marketing toward a male audience. As more men and women commit to portraying women realistically, perhaps these shows’ popularity will grow and improve the opinion on female-led series.

## Conclusion

Including women in the superhero genre is not enough; even having characters like Black Widow, Wonder Woman, and Supergirl in films and on television will not close the gap between superheroes and superheroines. When both male and female characters are written realistically, with realistic interaction void of excessive competition or degradation, then the comic companies

can say they are on the way to true success. A superheroine's strength does not need to threaten a superhero; ideally, she should be able to hold her own show, or at least work in tandem with a hero. Allowing heroines to stand up for themselves is important for female viewers' self-esteem; a heroine may be allowed flaws, but those flaws, as with male heroes, do not need to define her. A heroine's costume or body shape should not determine her worth as a hero; but rather her power, her intellect, her skills, and her personality. Females should be able to enjoy the superhero genre as much as any male, and should have equal access to merchandise and films or shows. There are other ways to make money than to objectify women, as well as men, without having to fall back to 'selling sex.' Women must be taken seriously as human beings, on equal grounds with men, stepping away from the tired tropes assigned to females. Progress is already being made; since the sky is the limit, perhaps we can get sexism "up, up, and away" from the superhero genre.

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