

Fantastic Feminism:  
Female Characters in Superhero  
Comic Books

By Ingrid Marie Fretheim



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Books

Ingrid Fretheim

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Ingrid Marie Fretheim

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IV

# **Abstract:**

The main focus of this thesis is to offer new insight into the portrayal of female superheroes in comic books and the ways in which they highlight important feminist issues. I have divided the topic into three chapters, each featuring a female superhero and discussing different aspects of their visual and narrative presence, and analyzing how they express feminist and psychoanalytic topics both in relation to each other as well as compared to corresponding male superheroes. The first chapter looks at Wonder Woman, who is an iconic presence among superheroes in general, examines the ways in which this is accomplished through images and narrative. The second chapter discusses She-Hulk, and what is problematic about the monstrosity associated with the character. Finally, the third chapter analyzes Black Widow, and how the character challenges gender roles through both bodily image and her superhero identity. In concluding, the main points will be summarized as the superheroes are compared and contrasted to highlight the argument that I am proving.

# Acknowledgements:

I said at the start of the first semester that I wanted to do a Master's degree in English Literature because I had so much fun doing my Bachelor's degree. Now, almost two years later, I can honestly say that writing this thesis has been a fun and rewarding experience from beginning to end. Being allowed to devote myself full-time to the study of literature in general and comic books in particular has been enriching and interesting, and I have enjoyed developing my knowledge and understanding of both. Having greatly contributed towards this growth, I would like to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor Rebecca Scherr, for good and helpful advice, for her support and patience, and for inspiring my interest in graphic novels and comics through her seminar "The Auto-Graphic Novel". She has contributed corrections and insightful comments to my drafts, and any mistakes still remaining are my own.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<b>1 Chapter one – Wonder Woman.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Introduction .....	7
1.2 Hero/heroine term binary .....	8
1.3 The superhero identity .....	9
1.4 Body of the superhero .....	12
1.5 Body changes .....	14
1.6 Costume .....	18
1.7 Weapons and tools.....	21
1.8 The token boyfriend.....	26
1.9 Conclusion .....	29
<b>2 Chapter two – She-Hulk.....</b>	<b>31</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	31
2.2 Creation .....	32
2.3 Origin story.....	35
2.4 The identity of She-Hulk .....	39
2.5 Body image .....	41
2.6 The abject.....	43
2.7 The monstrous-feminine .....	47
2.8 Costume .....	49
2.9 Conclusion .....	54
<b>3 Chapter three – Black Widow.....</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	55
3.2 Origin story.....	56
3.3 The superhero identity .....	60
3.4 Body image .....	62
3.5 Costume .....	65
3.6 Weapons/tools .....	67
3.7 (Lack of) Token boyfriend.....	69
3.8 Portrayal of women in Edmondson’s Black Widow series.....	70
3.9 Live-action appearances .....	72
3.10 Conclusion.....	75
Conclusion .....	77
Works Cited.....	80

# Introduction

A major voice in comic book scholarship, Hillary Chute has in recent years argued for the recognition of the comic book genre within academic discourse, arguing that comics scholarship creates a more diverse dialogue in several fields of literary studies. A distinction remains, however, between the genre of nonfiction graphic novels, or autobiographical works in comic book format, and comic book fiction, a variety of genres including, among others, the American superhero comics. This division in comic book scholarship is partly maintained by Chute herself, who emphasizes the nonfiction autobiographical works over all others in her argumentation, and therefore disregards the remaining comic book genres more or less entirely, creating a classification within which the commercial and fictional genre of comic books are not considered sufficiently interesting for academic scholarship. In “Divisions in Comics Scholarship”, Ben Saunders criticizes Chute for this tendency of classification in her article “Comics as Literature?” in which she introduces the general field of comic books and proceeds to focus on graphic novels at the cost of disregarding most fictional genres (Chute 455). In response to Saunders’ criticism, Chute argues that excluding fictional comics on behalf of nonfictional works in that particular case was a question of narrowing the focus of the article, and not indicated as a means of separating the genres in terms of academic potential (Saunders and Chute 294). However, in another article, “The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” Chute argues for feminist issues in comics and graphic novels to be considered within the academic discourse, and again proceeds to disregard the genre of fictional comics and proving her point through an analysis of an autobiographical novel, namely *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (92).

My intention in recounting this discussion is not to argue against Chute, but rather to illuminate the need for an extension of the academic discourse to include more commercial comic book genres in order to benefit from a more diverse discussion with regards to a variety of issues. By making such a claim, I am not suggesting that no such research has been done, but that a broadening of the already existing discourse is beneficial for the overall understanding of how the different theoretical issues apply to the medium of comics as a whole. That said, such a development has, in recent years, slowly extended to some fictional genres of comic books, but the genre that generally

receives the most criticism for being commercial and “low-brow”, to use Saunders’ term, is the superhero comic book. Following a publication history far outdating the history of graphic novels, the superhero genre has regained some of its earlier popularity with the present-day commercial success of live-action cinematic adaptations of well-known superheroes, and a small number of academic scholars have followed this increase in exposure and popularity, forming a discussion of whether superhero comics promote or prohibit different theoretical issues.

The areas that have received the most attention within the scholarly discourse of superhero comic books are gender roles, femininity and masculinity, representation of political and contemporary issues as well as some studies about readership.

A significant theoretical topic that has received little attention is in what way superhero comic books present female characters and superheroes with regards to feminist issues. Where such an analysis has been done, it mostly considers the study of a single female superhero, and in nearly every case, the character discussed is Wonder Woman. A larger study of more than one female superhero compared and contrasted with each other as well as corresponding male superheroes has, to the extent of my knowledge and research, not yet been done. What could be benefited from such a study that the already existing discourse seems to lack, is an understanding of how female characters are represented and perceived by the predominantly male readership as well as the slowly increasing minority of female readers, and extending terms of feminist and psychoanalytic elements to a medium that reaches children as well as adults and influences their perception of women. To disregard the superhero genre or the need for a closer evaluation of the portrayal of female characters would be to overlook this industry’s power of influence over contemporary society, and therefore a force of consequence to further development of theoretical discourse.

This study is based on a recognition of the need for further examination and analysis of female superheroes with regards to relevant feminist issues and a comparison with male superheroes so as to recognize and evaluate whether these female characters convincingly embody healthy feminist models that corresponds to the representations of men in the same genre. The genre traditionally displays its characters visually in an exaggerated and characteristic form, but are these expectations similar for both sexes, and if not, to what effects are the differences expressed? The objective of implementing such a study is to extend the contemporary discourse further in an aspiration to develop

an understanding of the major impact that superhero comics, as an iconic genre within graphic novels and comics, have on past and future generations of both feminist and patriarchal society.

Literary criticism about the female sex, gender binaries, and identity in comics and graphic novels have fronted strong arguments that graphic novels illuminate issues concerning gender binaries and sexual objectification of female characters in a way that encourages a productive debate about these topics.

What these arguments tend to do, however, is to examine graphic novels and disregard the comics genre partly or completely, which indirectly dismisses the possibility that comics can consider or promote feminist discourses. Within the genre of comics, superhero comics are viewed as the most sexist genre, and the female superheroes as idealistic versions of what the patriarchy and adolescent boys believe women should look like.

In disregarding superhero comics like this, critics risk dismissing important arguments in the discourse around these issues, particularly aspects of it that reach millions of people each year, and thus affect the way that the female gender is considered in culture and in real life. While popular culture has been more or less frowned upon in literary circles until recently, we need to consider that they are a major influence on cultural opinions today, and as such, superhero comics contribute in shaping part of the modern discourses about sex and gender.

I will proceed to argue in this thesis that analyzing superhero comics in light of these issues and debates will, to some degree, offer new and interesting arguments relevant to recent debates.

Considering the surge in popularity of comic books following the success of live-action film adaptations of comic book characters in recent years, the genre's potential for influencing contemporary discourse has increased significantly, causing a more urgent need for an extension of academic interests. It is such an extension that this thesis is attempting to facilitate, as well as an understanding some of the issues raised in superhero comic books.

The means by which this analysis have been carried out is by using three different female superheroes that each represent something unique in relation to feminist topics, and I will illuminate these issues by comparing and contrasting the characters with each other as well as with corresponding male superheroes. The respective female

superheroes have been chosen for the study because they either embody or highlight certain issues or concerns, but also because they have a significant power in terms of reaching and influencing a large number of readers. With that in mind, the three female superheroes I have chosen for this study are Wonder Woman, She-Hulk and Black Widow.

With the absolute longest publication history of any female superhero, Wonder Woman represents an obvious choice with regards to both emphasizing different concerns and in relation to popularity. Most of the research done on female superheroes so far has included or focused mainly on Wonder Woman, and doing a study of female superheroes without including her would be to ignore the most significant influence on the development of standards within female characters in the genre. Of the three superheroes in this thesis, she is the only brand registered with DC Entertainment, and is frequently referred to as one of DC's "big three" alongside Superman and Batman. Wonder Woman is unique in terms of being created by a psychologist with no prior experience in the comic book industry, and as a result, her background story is complex and original, a factor that may have contributed towards her popularity.

She-Hulk, on the other hand, represents the majority of female superheroes in that she is a secondary female creation based on an already existing male superhero. The list of similar female superheroes is long and involves Supergirl, Spider-Girl, Spider-Woman, Batwoman and Ms. Marvel. Choosing one of these secondary superheroes who shares a background with an original male counterpart is interesting in terms of exploring any connections between originality and commercial success. The reason for using She-Hulk in particular involves associations of monstrosity and features that correlate to psychoanalytical issues such as the abject and the monstrous-feminine in a way that emphasizes the *other* in female superheroes and what is essentially problematic about gender roles in superhero comic books.

The third superhero is Black Widow, who, like Wonder Woman represents a unique concept rather than a secondary copy. She represents an interesting take on conventional gender roles by embodying masculine traits both physically and psychologically, and challenges the expectations of female characters within the superhero genre.

In addition to this, Black Widow has experienced increased popularity through the live-action versions of Marvel comics, where she has appeared as a supporting

character in various movies featuring Iron Man and the Avengers. Despite this popularity and an expressed wish from fans for a solo feature, Marvel has confirmed that no such Black Widow film is planned, and a general caution against producing movies starring female superheroes as lead characters seems to be the rule, out of fear that female superheroes are less popular and bankable than male superheroes. In June 2017, however, Warner Brothers' Wonder Woman is set to premier in cinemas, after a supporting role as Wonder Woman in *Batman v Superman* in 2014 earned actress Gal Gadot sufficient success for Warner Brothers to chance a solo feature. Wonder Woman has not appeared in live-action productions since the 1960s, whereas both Superman and Batman have had a number of different movies and actors over the years. This clear gender differentiation is an interesting topic for further discussion, and I attempt to look at some of the factors contributing towards this tendency in this study, and connecting this to the seeming lack of requests for new female superheroes in the commercial comic book market. Additionally, the topic of movie appearances is useful in terms of the main argument in this thesis, namely to explore feminist concerns regarding characters that reach and influence the larger public, and recent years' movie productions have caused a significant surge in comic book sales and popularity, as well as an increased focus on female superheroes, which naturally nominates Wonder Woman and Black Widow as a focus for this study.

The thesis is structured with three chapters, each dealing with a superhero and related issues as well as theoretical background and analysis. The order of the chapters is as follows: Wonder Woman, She-Hulk and finally, Black Widow.

As mentioned earlier, the superheroes in this thesis have also been chosen as representatives for different theoretical issues, such as gender identity, gender roles, abjection and the monstrous-feminine. The theoretical base used for discussing these topics consists of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. While I am certain that the discourse could have benefited from a wider and more diverse choice of topics within literary theory, the selection has been made with the purpose of illuminating prominent issues relating to each chosen superhero, which, in order to treat each issue properly, resulted in a narrowing of theoretical background for clarity.

The study concludes that a closer examination of the representation of female characters within the superhero comic book genre in general would be beneficial both from a theoretical standpoint as well as beneficial to the comic book industry itself. While this thesis attempts to illuminate the need for such an examination, the overall result of the direct analysis of the characters shows major differences in the ways that female superheroes are portrayed and narrated, and that these differences might, to a certain degree, determine the commercial success of the character. I use the word “might” because further research on this topic is necessary in order to determine whether this is the case, as this thesis lacks the required space to do such a conclusion justice. The predominantly male readership is something that this study returns to on several occasions, especially with regards to commercial success, and one of the questions asked is whether or not the readership is male for the most part because female readers fail to find the genre interesting, or if it is a result of the comic book business spending too little time and not enough resources on the development of interesting female characters. Scott McCloud’s theory of reader identification suggests that the reader seeks to identify with the cartoon (36), and in order to do so, female readers need a female character that represents realistic and healthy values and body ideals. While this thesis suggests as much, the research required to make a valid conclusion on this topic would call for a longer and more complex study than the boundaries of this thesis allows for. The topic is nonetheless interesting and even important with regards to comic book publishers interested in producing interesting and successful characters, and I do hope that the discussion in this thesis might promote a fascination with the topic that will eventually lead to further research of the issue.

The main goal of the study is to show the need for extended research on several areas with regards to the superhero comic book genre, and the three superheroes examined within the thesis have been chosen out of the belief that they might each highlight certain topics, and as such, further studies of the same or corresponding topics would benefit from a wider selection of characters as well.

# 1 Chapter one – Wonder Woman

## 1.1 Introduction

As one of DC Comics' 'big three', Wonder Woman is perhaps the most well-known female superhero, and since her creation in 1941, the *Wonder Woman* comic book has been almost continuously published, which is unique for a superhero comic featuring a female protagonist. From 1941 to his death in 1947, all stories were written by psychologist William Moulton Marston, whose vision was to create "a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman" (Madrid 35), and by describing Wonder Woman in those words and comparing her to the most popular superhero of the time, he expressed an intent that Wonder Woman would hold up in comparison to all other superheroes, and not just the female ones. In *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown comments on Marston's vision for Wonder Woman and suggests that "from her very beginning, then, Wonder Woman has struggled with the symbolic burden of conforming to a masculine genre's fantasy of physical strength and the cultural pre-eminence of female beauty" (236). The superhero genre is predominantly male in nature, more so then than now, and the female characters are historically very feminine, in need of rescuing, and drawn like pinup girls. By creating a female superhero that appeals to young, female readers as a feministic ideal of strength, power and justice, and at the same time responding to the expectations of the adolescent boys which made up the main part of comic book readership by giving her sex appeal, Wonder Woman challenged the expectations of the genre both as a superhero and as a woman. Struggling to conform to such different expectations, Wonder Woman's success as a feminist icon has been variable at the very least, and the degree to which she has succeeded has been greatly influenced by the times in which the different issues have been published. In this chapter, therefore, I will be following the publication history more or less chronologically so as to be able to offer context in terms of real life events that have influenced the development of the character Wonder Woman.



While examining how Wonder Woman compares to male superheroes, a comparison to the other two major superheroes of DC Publishing; Batman and Superman, who has a similar publication history, will offer some insight into whether or not Marston managed to achieve his ambitions to create a female superhero who could, pound for pound, hold her own besides the major male superheroes of her day.

## 1.2 Hero/heroine term binary

I would like to make a remark about the term superheroine, and propose that superheroine is not the female version of the male superhero, but rather, 'superhero' and 'superheroine' represents a binary in which each term signifies a very different role in the narrative. In "Her Body, Himself" Carol J. Clover discusses the significance of 'the final girl' in slasher movies, and the difference between *saving* and *being saved*:

By the lights of folk tradition, she is not a heroine, for whom phase 1 consists of being saved by someone else, but a hero, who rises to the occasion and defeats the adversary with his own wit and hands. [...] Those who save themselves are male, and those who are saved by others are female. No matter how 'feminine' his experience in phase 1, the traditional hero, if he rises against his adversary and saves himself in phase 2, will be male. (305)

As such, according to traditional folk tales and fairy tales, the heroine is the damsel in distress; the passive character that the hero sets out to rescue. While she does not represent the antithesis of the hero –that is the villain's job– the heroine lacks his agency, his bravery, and his active role in the act of the rescue. Following Beauvoir's argument that women represent a 'lack' or an 'other' against which men define themselves and their identity, the heroine is the passive agent against which the valiant, active hero defines himself (163-167). The fact that the terms are gendered, suggesting that all men are active heroes while all women are passive damsels in distress, makes them sexist in nature.

In the world of the superhero, then, a superheroine would not be, say, Wonder Woman, but Lois Lane, who has no superpowers herself, but constantly gets into trouble from which Superman has to rescue her. Superman is the hero, the active rescuer, while Lois is the heroine of the story, the passive damsel in distress. Using the term

'superheroine' as a female version of the male 'superhero' and expecting it to carry the same meaning as 'superhero', would be to ignore the significance of the tradition behind the two terms, and for the entirety of this thesis, therefore, the term 'female superhero' will be used to represent the female characters in possession of superpowers, or those performing supernatural or superhuman acts.

### **1.3 The superhero identity**

By its very nature, the superhero represents a split personality in that the superheroes also have an alter ego that allows them to walk the streets and live their lives without being recognized. To Superman, that is Clark Kent, the timid reporter working alongside Lois Lane at the Daily Planet, who snatches scoops about Superman in front of her nose because he knows exactly where Superman will appear next, also allowing him a valid reason for disappearing from work while Superman does something public. Wonder Woman's alter ego is Diana Prince, who has held different jobs depending on what suited her superhero personality, but is most commonly either a secretary or lieutenant in the US army so as to get information that Wonder Woman needs, especially during wartime. Both Clark Kent and Diana Prince wear glasses to distinguish themselves from their superhero personalities, which keep them from being recognized by other people. While both Wonder Woman and Superman had their first names before they assumed their superhero persona, the lives of their alter egos have been constructed as a secondary requirement; they were both in possession of superpowers from birth, and formed lives as ordinary people to be able to live unnoticed.

Batman's alter ego is an ordinary man, devoid of superhuman powers and born as Bruce Wayne. Later in his adult life, he decides to become Batman to fight the Gotham underworld, but Batman is a creation made by Bruce Wayne, not the other way around. Where Diana Prince and Clark Kent are private personas, allowing the superhero to become just another face in the crowd whereas Wonder Woman and Superman are their public faces, Batman is a private and secretive superhero that operates in darkness and shadow while Bruce Wayne is the public persona of the two. Bruce Wayne is also a

constructed identity, because while the name is real, the rich playboy personality is a mask that covers up his second life as Batman. Batman wears the physical mask, but it is much closer to the 'real' Bruce than is his public face as Bruce Wayne, the rich CEO of Wayne Enterprises.

This division of personalities within the superhero identity has been considered representative for many things, among them schizophrenia, and it becomes interesting also in terms of sex and gender. According to Judith Butler, identity, and more specifically, gender identity, is not a stable construct, but a matter of performance through acts that also constitute sex and gender. If none of these constructs were stable, it would be possible for the superhero and the alter ego to represent different identities, gender and sex as a consequence of their diverging personalities and life choices. The identity that represents the mask, or the 'other', Diana Prince, Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne respectively, have been created according to the idea of anonymity and as a kind of critique or ironical understanding of 'ordinary' people. In Quentin Tarantino's feature *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, Bill makes a remark about Superman: "Superman didn't become Superman, Superman was born Superman. [...] What Kent wears – the glasses, the business suit – that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. [...] Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race." (Quoted in Hanley, 32) The clumsy and timid Clark Kent is what Superman thinks that most 'ordinary' people are like, and when this analysis is applied to Batman and Wonder Woman, the interpretation becomes interesting. Bruce Wayne's public persona that sleeps with a different woman every night, shows up to parties with two or more dates and makes sly remarks about other women's outfits, represents his understanding of what constitutes a 'normal' rich, single man in his thirties. Likewise, Diana Prince's inability to be self-sufficient and confident, and her one-sided infatuation with Steve Trevor, is Wonder Woman's interpretation of all other women. After all, that is what blending in is about; becoming so alike everyone else that nobody notices that you are there, and to these superheroes, ordinary men are misogynistic, while regular women are stupid and dependent upon assistance from men, or even in need of rescue.

The function of the alter ego personality is to cover the gap between the ordinariness of regular people and the *otherness* of the superhero persona. All of the superheroes in question; Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, represent the *other* in that they are different from most people. Superman was born on a different planet and is an alien,

Wonder Woman is a Greek goddess, and while Batman is essentially human, in his superhero form he represents the animal, the bat, as much as the human part of him. Aaron Taylor proposes that Batman represents the monstrous other more than the other two because his superhero persona is more driven by basic –animal– instinct, and because of his constant assistance of machines and gadgets (356-357). From another point of view, however, Wonder Woman is the odd girl out. According to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, woman herself is the *other* insofar as she is understood as a 'lack' or hollow against which men define themselves. Much in the same way as the superhero is 'super' or *other* because most people are not in possession of superpowers, men define themselves as men precisely by comparing themselves to what they are *not*; women. As a woman, Wonder Woman represents the *other* in more than one way. She is different from most people because she is divine and in possession of superhuman powers, but also because the majority of superheroes, which would otherwise form a group of people she could identify with, are men, she becomes the *other* even among her equals. On her native Paradise Island she is but one woman among an exclusively female society where all the inhabitants possess the same superpowers and thus represent what constitutes 'normal' in that setting. Diana left this for a world where women of any nationality and capability represent a 'lack' against which men define what it is like to be 'a man', and in addition to this, she becomes the *other* because she is also, to a certain degree, *alien* in comparison to most people.

Understanding the superhero identity is as much about understanding what it is *not*, as it is about understanding what it is. In her article "The Pursuit of Identity in the Face of Paradox: Indeterminacy, Structure and Repetition in Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman", Clare Pitkethly suggests that due to the complexity of the superhero's diverging personalities, there is a search for a stable factor against which to define the sum of the superhero's identity, and that function is most often ascribed to the supervillain. Serving as the direct opposite against which to compare the superhero's two personas, the supervillain allows for the certainty that regardless of the flaws the alter ego persona might display, it will still end up being characterized as "good" in comparison (219). Although Bruce Wayne or Batman might occasionally come across as stretching the understanding of doing the right thing, the presence of the Joker serves to assure the reader that Bruce is essentially a good person in both his role as Batman and in his Bruce Wayne playboy persona. Although Wonder Woman has no enemy as iconic

as the Joker, her two personalities, while different, are neither as dark nor as violent as Bruce Wayne/Batman's, which reduces the need for a supervillain to put her actions into perspective.

The binary of the superhero identity signifies the difference between how the superhero is perceived by most people, and the way that the superhero sees regular people. The superhero persona is given room to unfold and display active agency, whereas the alter ego personality allows the superhero to blend in with the crowd, as well as providing an interesting view on how the superhero perceives people without superpowers. Seeing Diana Prince as Wonder Woman's critique of humankind, the superhero persona of the binary, while representing the *other*, also stands out in positive regard, and strengthens the impression of Wonder Woman as a positive feminist character in comparison.

## **1.4 Body of the superhero**

There are a few things to say about the superhero body in general before looking closer at Wonder Woman's physical representation. Apart from the occasional Elseworld-title (DC Comics' term for stories taking place in an alternate universe and therefore does not have consequences for the status quo of the storyline) superheroes are presented as the ultimate paragons of bodily fitness. As a representation of their superhuman strength, male superheroes have muscles so exaggerated that they seem almost unreal, from time to time they even have biceps that are bigger than their heads (Taylor 351). Female superheroes, as a rule, have slim, feminine bodies and big breasts. In his article "He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body" Aaron Taylor examines the body ideal for the superhero and concludes that the male superhero is as objectified as the female superhero in that they are both presented with overtly exaggerated musculature and made a spectacle of, likening them to male bodybuilders and an unrealistic body ideal for adolescent male readers. He also argues that this is hardly ever remarked upon because it is taboo in modern society to claim that males are subject to a similar

objectification as females, because the female is so often identified as the “other” in society (352-353). Robert and Julie Voelker-Morris also agree with Taylor’s observation: “The acceptance of violent aggression by males to solve problems is heightened to extreme with a superhero body type that amplifies aspects of wish fulfilment [*sic*]” (110).

At the same time, the body of the female superhero is carefully feminized so as to prevent any suspicions of homosexual tendencies (Taylor 353), which one might suspect is the case for the male superheroes as well; enhancing their masculine features out of a need to prevent them from being identified as gay. It is interesting, therefore, that Taylor also claims that the male superhero is in fact androgynous, because a male body with exaggerated musculature should necessarily have proportionate sexual organs, or in his own words: “In a fictional universe in which any part of the anatomy has the potential to be super-powered, the superpenis is still strictly taboo” (353). It is interesting, then, that the most enhanced part of a female superhero’s anatomy is her breasts, which is a feature that not only clearly identifies the subject as female, but is also a part of the body that is not affected by musculature; in fact, most bodybuilders have very small breasts or silicone implants. In my opinion, this difference between the male and female superhero physique is, like so many other factors, due to the readership of superhero comics being mostly made up by adolescent, heterosexual males, and that their interest in the male superhero is as a masculine ideal, whereas the female superhero represents a romantic interest and should therefore be, beyond any doubt, feminized and –assumably–heterosexual.

Another point made by Taylor is that these enhanced and exaggerated male bodies can be seen not only as a masculine ideal for young males, but also as an ironic representation of the modern cult of fitness ideals (351). One could apply this argument to female superheroes as well and claim that the slim and sexualized bodies are in fact ironic representations of female body ideals, and while I recognize that some of the remarks and incidents where Wonder Woman finds herself surprised by the reception her looks receive from ordinary men and that these situations might seem ironic on behalf of sexism, to say that her body in itself is ironic would be to forget Marston’s original intention of creating a female superhero that was as beautiful as she was brilliant. I would, however, say that the feminized body of Wonder Woman has from time to time been used by the writers to shed light on sexism as they have made her

encounter misogynistic men and correct them. There is irony, but not on behalf of Wonder Woman's body.

## 1.5 Body changes

After Marston's death in 1947, *Wonder Woman* started a process of change signified through different writers and artists. While the narrative elements are important, so are the ways in which the characters are drawn and perceived by the artists, and Wonder Woman's body changed several times over the following decades. During Marston's time as writer, H.G. Peter was responsible for the artwork, and being older than most contemporary comic book artists, he also had his very own specific style that was slightly more conservative. He drew Wonder Woman as a feminine but realistic woman with proportionate breasts, muscular body and a pretty, girlish face. Peter stayed on *Wonder Woman* for almost a decade after Marston died, and most of the artists who took over followed his lead with only minor changes. When the comic book was rebooted in 1987 following Wonder Woman's death and a year without publication, George Perez was brought on as an artist. His Wonder Woman had larger breasts,



Figure 1: Peter's Wonder Woman

longer hair and a face resembling more of a grown woman than Peter's girlish features. Perez' Wonder Woman was still slim with a natural and realistic body, but with slightly more muscular thighs. The first female artist, Colleen Doran, kept Perez' version with big breasts and muscular thighs, as well as the long, black hair, and made her costume tighter by making her waist unnaturally slim. Between 1994 and 1995, artist Mike Deodato Jr. changed her appearance further by softening the hard features of a grown woman and ruffling up her hair, which made her seem more like a porn star. At the beginning of the new millennium Phil

Jimenez took over, returning to the face of the grown woman, but enhancing her physical appearance to such a degree that she resembled a female body builder, all the while keeping the breasts, but allowing her waist to be slightly wider than Doran's version. Terry Dodson's 2006-2008 Wonder Woman was less muscular and more feminized, with the face of a supermodel with shorter hair, but the same breasts. Recently, Cliff Chiang changed her appearance by making her less feminine; toning down the breasts and the muscles, allowing her a natural waist and face, but keeping the hair long and voluminous.

Although the changes are generally attributed to the artists, they are also greatly influenced by the times in which they are drawn. In the 40s and the 50s, when Peter drew Wonder Woman girlish and feminine, women were expected to care for their looks, be modest and pretty, and remained girls until they were married, when they became the responsibility of their husband. With the 80s, women were more independent, and Perez' artwork reflected that, making Wonder Woman more of a woman than a girl. Deodato's porn star appearance responded to a rise in popular culture of the image of slim, flawless women with sex appeal. The later years' focus on the sexual objectification of women and gender equality is resonated in Chiang's more realistic Wonder Woman.

Considering Wonder Woman's divine heritage, she should have superhuman strength without needing her muscles to be able to realistically support it, and the same should be true for her capability to make superhuman jumps and other physical feats. However, looking at her in comparison with Superman, who also has an extraterrestrial heritage that should allow him the same abilities without having the necessary muscle power to back it up, the argument is flawed. While Superman has been through as many bodily changes as Wonder Woman, he has always been a physically powerful male with enhanced, almost unrealistic features, whereas Wonder Woman has been everything from girlishly slim to abnormally muscular. Should one, therefore, look



Figure 2: Perez' Wonder Woman



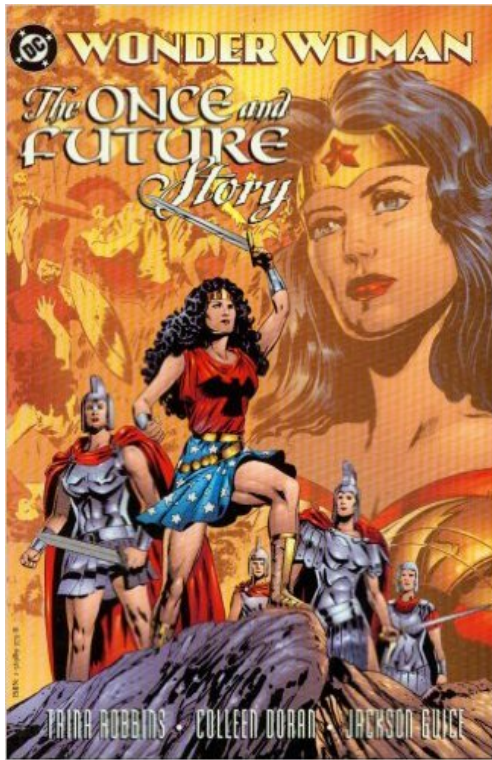


Figure 3: Doran's Wonder Woman

at her body as if it were to respond to realistic requirements, none of the artistic versions of the character seems to be adequate. Even Jimenez' bodybuilder image would not realistically be enough to support her physical actions, as no real female bodybuilder would have her superhuman strength. With Superman, attempts have been made at making him so unnaturally muscular that he even exceeds the maximum limit of male bodybuilders, and thus might to some degree defend his superhuman strength. Wonder Woman, however, has more often than not been drawn as a slim, pretty girl, rather than giving her a body that could support her impressive physical feats. This is an important



Figure 4: Jimenez' Wonder Woman

example in how the female and the male superheroes are treated differently. One of the reasons for this might be that comic books in general



Figure 5: Deodato Jr.'s Wonder Woman

are read by white, heterosexual, adolescent males, who identify with the male superhero as an ideal, while the female superhero represents the ideal woman as a romantic interest, rather than the realistic woman. Their expectations of a woman are formed by the contemporary society and culture, and the young girls who read superhero comic books are forced to identify with this unnatural representation of the (adult) woman.

In *Batman v Superman*, Wonder Woman, Batman and Superman interact on-screen for the first time in a live action movie. Cory Albertson makes a remark about this in “The New Wonder Woman”, referring to a gala in Lex Luthor’s home, where Bruce Wayne is talking to Clark Kent –neither of them apparently aware of the other’s secret identity– when Diana Prince walks by and Wayne looks at her with what Albertson identifies as Laura Mulvey’s term “the male gaze” (68). Essentially, the male gaze is used to objectify women, and not only is Wonder Woman objectified by her own artists and readers, but apparently other male superheroes also find it convenient to do so. One might argue, however, that Bruce Wayne’s view on women is an act to keep the public from discovering his secret identity of Batman, while Batman is in fact a much more real representation of his identity, and as Batman, he never looks at Wonder Woman in such a way. To Bruce Wayne, she is (outwardly) a representative of the *other* and a sexual object, but to Batman she is his equal. This reflects on the previous point about the superhero identity and Bruce Wayne’s behavior as a criticism of most men, whereas in his role as Batman, his values and personality are free to unfold.

The interesting detail regarding the sexualization of Wonder Woman, however, is that the Marston-era morality and vision of bringing liberation and equality to the women of the world has not been disregarded entirely, but remains to some degree present in every incarnation of the character. Gadot’s Wonder Woman in *Batman v Superman*, for example, appears to be well aware of the male gaze and Bruce Wayne’s attempts at sexualizing and charming her, and makes a clear distance between the two. Similarly, the comic book character in the six-volume series of *Wonder Woman* by Brian Azzarello constantly reminds the male characters that women are not objects of desire. Both of these and several other versions of Wonder Woman shows that being a feminist icon does not merely consist of *not* being objectified, but through questioning current practices she might emerge a healthy role model after all.

## 1.6 Costume

Although an iconic part of her image, Wonder Woman's costume has been subject to changes throughout her publication history. Peter's original version had a star-spangled skirt with a red top featuring the American eagle, red and white boots and a discrete gold headband. The skirt was daring for a 1940s woman, but extremely modest compared to later versions. Subsequently, Ross Andru's version of the costume kept the blue fabric and the stars, but replaced the skirt with something in-between short shorts and underpants, that cover the upper part of her thigh. During the next twenty years the costume stayed more or less the same, give or take the size of the pants, that became smaller and shorter with each new artist, until Colleen Doran's version that



Figure 6: Dodson's Wonder Woman

brought back Peter's skirt, only to have it removed by Jill Thompson shortly after, and then in 1994 Mike Deodato Jr. drew the pants so small that all of the thigh and some of the hip is visible from the side. Chiang's modern version, however, complimenting the more natural physique, is less flashy, without an eagle symbol on the front, less cleavage, and with much more modest pants than Deodato Jr.'s version. As Lynda Carter's costume in the 1960s TV-show was modeled on the contemporary suit from the comic book, featuring a slim waist, visible cleavage and minimal pants, the costume worn by Gal Gadot in *Batman v Superman* in 2016 was based on Chiang's version, where the top resembles a soldier's breastplate more than a swimsuit with a pushup bra.

Compared to the costumes of male superheroes, however, even Chiang's version is sexist. Male superheroes wear something resembling a unitard, covering everything but their heads and feet, sporting flashy symbols and often accompanied by a cape. The



costume distinguishes the superhero persona from the alter ego, thus the reader can easily recognize whether the character is representing the superhero or the alter ego in a certain situation. The costume is a business suit that comes on when the superhero “goes to work”, and then comes off again once they are done and go back to their alter ego personality. Following Taylor’s argument that superhero comics objectify even the male superheroes through body image and costumes, it is much truer for the female superheroes. DiPaolo, however, argues in *War, Politics and Superheroes* that far from being sexist, Wonder Woman’s costume is a symbol of female independence, and that she uses it as a tool to distinguish between the misogynistic men and those that can see beyond her cleavage:

Diana’s nakedness is symbolically linked to her politics. Her half-nakedness is part and parcel of her political agenda, so those who are uneasy about her clothes are often uneasy about her broader message of female empowerment. When Diana confronts the world with her exposed flesh, she expects a well-adjusted reaction. (77)

Though I understand DiPaolo’s point that this expresses Wonder Woman’s independence and self-assuredness, I disagree with the notion that drawing men in unitards and women in swimsuits is not considered sexist as long as the men do not



Figure 7: Chiang's Wonder Woman

react to the woman's bare skin. Furthermore, when accomplishing the sort of superhuman physical feats that superheroes have to, the female superhero cannot also spend her time worrying whether her breasts are falling out of the costume or if her pants are too tight. I spoke to a friend of mine who competes in fitness and does workouts with weights daily, and she said that she would not be able to do half of the things she has to do if she was wearing Wonder Woman's minimalistic costume. Although elastic, it simply does not cover enough skin to move freely. There is a gap between what women are expected to do, and how they are expected to look while doing this, and it is clearly visible in the world of the superhero where everything is a little more extreme.

In *Batman v Superman*, Gal Gadot's character has all her scenes in the first half of the movie as her alter ego Diana Prince, attending galas and wearing generally revealing costumes. In doing so, she catches the attention of Bruce Wayne/Batman who gives her the male gaze, as mentioned earlier, but she also uses her feminine appearance to distract him while she steals information from him. Albertson refers to this as a "patriarchal bargain": "[Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman] employs an exaggerated form of femininity that serves the desires of men as a strategy to gain access to male privilege" (68). To Albertson, this is not true feminism; using men's subconscious sexism as a weapon against them would not be necessary if true gender equality existed, and I agree. However, part of Wonder Woman's canon is that she comes from a matriarchal society and sees the modern world based on her matriarchal traditions and opinions, which makes her react to injustice against women with more sensitivity than people from the "man's world". Having now lived in the modern world for hundreds of years, while still fighting for women's rights, she will not be able to work convincingly as a female superhero unless she was able to compete against the male superheroes, and in realizing this, she uses the one weapon she has that they do not; her femininity. Again I emphasize the argument that a healthy female character does not necessarily have to embody the perfect feminist ideal, but rather express herself with an understanding of problematic practices and challenge them. So while I agree with Albertson that this is not what feminism is about, I also recognize that portraying Wonder Woman in such a way makes the male characters who fall for her strategy seem foolish, and then again invites the audience to recognize sexism as a problem, but in a form that does not invite as much room for uncertainty.



Figure 8: The different costumes of Wonder Woman through the times.

## 1.7 Weapons and tools

Every superhero has its own superpower, and every superhero has their own specific weapons. For Superman, it is his superstrength, his x-ray vision and his ability to fly. Batman has an arsenal of different weapons uniquely constructed for his use, and Wonder Woman has her lasso and her bracelets. While the selection of weapons may vary from issue to issue, the lasso and the bracelets have been a part of her act since Marston wrote her stories. The bracelets have a complex history, originating with the labors of Hercules and his ninth task; to defeat the goddess Hippolyta. When he failed to do so, he seduced her and enslaved the Amazons, who then went to Aphrodite for help, and she set them free and allowed them to live in peace on Paradise Island with a few conditions. The first was that no man would ever set foot on the island, and the second that they always wear the shackles that Hercules imprisoned them with, since referred to as “the bracelets of submission” (Madrid 36). These bracelets limited their powers,

and as such, Wonder Woman's bracelets are more of a reminder to be careful in her actions, rather than a weapon to use on the villains. They are also there for protection, as the metal can withstand anything, and she uses them to deflect bullets. They are therefore not the traditional weapon, but more of a protective reminder.

The bracelets of submission, exclusively used on women, say something about the role of women in the world where the Amazons lived before coming to Paradise Island. When Hippolyta sends her daughter to man's world to help the Americans, the Amazons have lived isolated on their island for thousands of years, and the term "man's world" does not exclusively refer to the world of mortal people. It refers to the world outside of Paradise Island, where the Amazons have been shackled and imprisoned by men, forced to live in submission of the other sex. In a sense, one might say that another reason for wearing the bracelets in the modern world, apart from making sure that Wonder Woman does not kill someone by accident, is that they also serve as a reminder of the trouble the Amazons were in when they last had to submit to a man, so as not to make the same mistake again. The duality of the bracelets is interesting in a feminist context, seeing as they both symbolize submission to man and patriarchy, as well as protection from bullets. The very thing that represents captivity and misogyny also represents safety and security. This, of course, is also true for the domestic role of most women in the decade of Wonder Woman's creation, where submitting to their husbands also offered predictability and safety. And yet, the bracelets are a reminder of a time of imprisonment, as security without freedom is precisely what Wonder Woman wanted to free women of America and man's world from. Making these bracelets the very symbol of Wonder Woman like Batman's mask or Superman's cape is significant, and the token from her past serves as a reminder to keep her from submitting to the will of man a second time, and thus becomes a weapon against misogyny and sexism.

The other very specific weapon used in every issue, is the lasso. When Diana sets off from Paradise Island with Steve Trevor to preserve "America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women," Hippolyta gives her the lasso, fashioned by the god Hephaestus, unbreakable and with the ability to make everyone tangled up in it tell the truth. This is undoubtedly a reference to Marston's real life invention of the lie detector test, and while it is also a weapon that utilizes submission, it turns the tables and allows Wonder Woman to make men submit to her, in contrast to the traditions in most societies in 1940s. What makes the lasso special even as a weapon in a superhero

comic book, is that it allows Wonder Woman to interrogate villains and learn their plans and intentions without actually touching them physically, and this does not necessarily make her a non-violent superhero, it does make her less violent and more just.

Arguments have been made that Wonder Woman's two central weapons being tools of submission is not a coincidence. Marston was untraditional in his private life, and wrote an adult fiction novel called *Venus With Us*, in which Julius Caesar's life and affairs with women are supplied with an interest in bondage. Tim Hanley argues in *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine* that Marston's interest in bondage is clearly visible in the adventures of Wonder Woman as well, referring to examples such as the Amazon warriors tying each other up in training sessions to practice escaping techniques, and a percentage of 80% women versus 20% men being tied up throughout Marston's issues of *Wonder Woman*. He also references an issue where Marston very specifically uses a rather rare instrument of bondage called "the brank", and gives a detailed instruction on how to use it in the comic book, which caused the editors to receive a lot of letters from concerned parents (Hanley 43-72).

While the percentage-wise difference between men and women submitted to bondage in *Wonder Woman* issues should not be ignored, neither should the fact that the lasso belongs to a woman and that it is in her hands that the lasso usually ends up tied to someone. In my experience, there are most often three different scenarios where someone gets tied up in a superhero comic book. First, the villain ties up a random character and keeps him or her prisoner until the superhero can save them and defeat the villain. Second, the superhero has trouble defeating the villain and is held prisoner himself/herself until that is overcome and the villain is defeated. And third, when the superhero defeats the villain, the latter is tied up safely. Considering Hanley's claim that 80 percent of the characters tied up in *Wonder Woman* issues are women, let us look at the variables. In my second scenario, where the superhero is tied up by the villain, or, which sometimes happen, Wonder Woman becomes entangled in her own lasso, the numbers in a superhero comic book featuring a female superhero, the numbers for female bondage would, naturally, be 100 percent. Then, looking at the two other scenarios, unfortunate characters held captive by the villains and the villains held captive by the superhero, the characters submitted to bondage in these cases represent the rest of the "population" in a comic book. If more women are tied up than men, that



could mean that in *Wonder Woman*, more villains are women, and more of the characters entangled in the conflict between superhero and villain are women. A higher percentage of female characters in general cannot be considered gender discrimination on behalf of women, even if some of them are tied up. I would also venture a guess that if the same analysis was made in issues of *Superman*, the percentage of women tied up compared to men would look more or less similar to Hanley's analysis of *Wonder Woman*, simply because Superman spends most of his time rescuing Lois Lane, who happens to be a woman.

Symbolically, the bracelets and the lasso are non-violent and forms circles, which would make them the opposite of phallic weapons -let us call them vaginal weapons- and therefore confirms *Wonder Woman's* role as a female superhero. Like the main character of the 1990s TV-series *MacGyver*, who frequently voiced a disdain for guns, *Wonder Woman* traditionally prefers not to use phallic or violent weapons such as guns or swords, but chooses to defeat her villains with reason and justice. In the 2016 live action movie *Batman v Superman*, however, Gal Gadot's *Wonder Woman* carries a sword and a shield into battle with Batman and Superman. In her article "The New *Wonder Woman*", Cory Albertson makes an observation about this:

Historically, *Wonder Woman* (most notably in Carter's embodiment) hasn't solely relied upon or sought out physical combat. But Gadot's version brandishes a sword and shield alongside the signature lasso of truth and bullet-deflecting bracelets. She looks like a warrior and grunts, growls, and lunges, sword first, at Doomsday, hacking off his hand. And when he knocks her to the ground, she looks up at him not with fear, but with a smirk. One she decides to fight, this *Wonder Woman* enjoys it. (Albertson 68)

Albertson finds this new and violent *Wonder Woman* contrary to the earlier, more passive versions, such as the one portrayed by Lynda Carter in the 1960s television show. Using phallic weapons such as a sword challenges the gender roles, and while Batman uses guns and Superman a spear in this very fight, it is *Wonder Woman* who faces critique for being contrary to the role of a true female superhero. In an article about the queerness of superheroes, Brian Mitchell Peters argues that "as masquerade creates a subtextual gay text, the movement away from gender stereotypes and conventional ideas of woman illustrate her lesbian subtexts. [...] Therefore, the woman who is represented with overtly masculine character traits, too much presence, or caught within a rage of altered power, can, according to Freud's psychoanalysis, reveal a distinctly masked homosexual meaning" (Peters). All challenge of gender roles,

therefore, should, in Peters' opinion, be considered as a masquerade with lesbian or gay subtext, and in making such a claim, he conforms heterosexual women to the role of the submissive housewife and the non-violent, second rate superhero. Wonder Woman can, therefore, never use a phallic weapon such as a sword without facing claims about homosexual tendencies. This is in agreement with Butler's theory of the gender identity construct from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and the claim that in the same way that the identity 'man' is stable only insofar as it can be compared to the identity of 'woman', so 'heterosexual' is stable only while it is compared to the term 'homosexual'. In superhero comic books, male superheroes are defined as 'male' up against the female characters that are "soft" and gentle in comparison, and in this binary, 'male' comes to signify strength and power, whereas 'female' is associated with soft, feminine features and personalities. A similar divergence should exist between heterosexual and homosexual superhero characters if a character is to be described as homosexual with any kind of certainty. Gender identities are constructed, and are only understandable as long as they are compared to each other or something else. But Butler also makes a claim that masquerade forms the essence of gender, and I would argue that if masquerade is in fact inherent in all gender, then it cannot be used as the factor that confirms a homosexual identity. In challenging gender constructs, then, Wonder Woman makes an attempt to widen the term 'female', or more fittingly in this case: 'woman', so that instead of defining 'woman' as everything that 'man' is not, 'woman' becomes its own construction. This also means going up against the binary of 'strong males' and 'soft females' that has become an established tendency within the genre. Because the term superhero is male, and the traditional superhero is a man, is being a female superhero not a challenge of gender constructs in itself? Following the understanding that 'man' needs to be defined by what it is not, namely 'woman', then a female superhero should follow very different rules than the male superhero, and might not even be a superhero in the traditional sense. In being a conventional –to use such a nondescript term– superhero, Wonder Woman is already confined by her gender, and not challenging these restrictions would be to make her just another damsel in distress; a superheroine.

## 1.8 The token boyfriend

In a paper presented at the Comic Con in 2006; "Wonder Woman: Lesbian or Dyke? Paradise Island as a Woman's Community," Trina Robbins introduces the term 'token boyfriend'. "Possibly so that readers will not suspect them of lesbianism, fictional American heroines for young girls always seem to be given Token Boyfriends. Nancy Drew had Ned Nickerson, and Barbie, of course, had Ken" (Robbins). Wonder Woman's token boyfriend is Steve Trevor. In essence, he serves the same narrative function as Lois Lane; besides providing Wonder Woman with someone to rescue, he is there to be a romantic interest of Wonder Woman's, and, in Robbins' terms, insurance to the readers that Wonder Woman is not homosexual. While this tactic is much used on strong, female characters, it does the same for male superheroes. Superman, with his rather complicated relationship between himself, Clark Kent and Lois Lane, does not have a record of being accused of being gay.

Batman, however, does not have a 'token girlfriend', and his closest companions are his butler Alfred and his protégé Robin, both male, and he has subsequently been interpreted as gay with alarming regularity. His alter ego, Bruce Wayne, is clearly heterosexual and has one-night stands and dates with several women at the same time quite often, but as Bruce Wayne's persona is used to cover up Batman's identity, it can be seen as a masquerade to cover up a homosexual identity. There have been female romantic interests, and as the more honest persona of the two is Batman, he seems, interestingly enough, to meet all of these when he is being Batman, whereas the women Bruce Wayne is dating are shallow and uninteresting to him. Referred to as "the prince of Gotham", Bruce Wayne/Batman struggles to find a woman to share his throne with him and provide him with children that he can pass it on to. Selina Kyle, otherwise known as Catwoman, considered settling down with him, but "believes that marrying him and becoming, functionally, a Disney Princess in a castle in 'New York' is a betrayal of her feminist sensibilities" (DiPaolo 62). He does father a child with the daughter of his enemy Ra's al Ghul, Talia al Ghul, but she pretends that she has a miscarriage and gives birth to the child in secret, and the boy grows up to become a supervillain, eventually crossing his father's path. As Bruce Wayne/Batman's romantic interests are fleeting and complicated, then, and he surrounds himself with Alfred and Robin, he is as

such in lack of a significant 'token girlfriend', and has therefore been accused of homosexuality quite regularly compared to other male superheroes. The rule of the token boyfriend/girlfriend does apply to male superheroes as well, it seems.

In the article "Stuck in Tights: Mainstream Superhero Comics' Habitual Limitations on Social Constructions of Male Superheroes," Robert and Julie Voelker-Morris examines the role of the male superhero in relation to women and family constructs, and the article argues that "the pervasive normative image of a male superhero is exemplified by autonomous, usually muscle-bound, physically powerful, violence-prone, emotionally detached males" (Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 103). This is, in essence, the normative requirement for a male superhero, and according to Peters and psychoanalysis, a female superhero who challenges this rule by being physically powerful and violence-prone –as in using phallic weapons– is masquerading homosexual tendencies. Such a superhero would therefore need a token boyfriend so as to assure her readers that she is in fact heterosexual, and Steve Trevor serves this purpose for Wonder Woman/Diana Prince.

Steve Trevor and Lois Lane, apart from assuring readers of the superhero's sexual identity, also perform another narrative function, which is that of giving the superhero a constant supply of damsels in distress. Though not quite as frequently in trouble as Lane, Trevor, being a soldier in the US army, is disposed to getting himself into difficult situations, and Wonder Woman is there to get him out of them. He falls in love with Wonder Woman, but she is not interested in marrying and settling down with him, so she keeps him at bay with a promise that when the world no longer needs her to save it, she will become his wife. Superman, however, is not that interested in Lois Lane, even though she is in love with him, failing to notice that his alter ego Clark Kent is interested in her. Lane's job as a journalist is also prone to get her in trouble, especially as she tries to get exclusive stories about Superman by being the first one on a scene when something happens, only to find out that once Superman has saved her, Kent, who works at the same newspaper, has made it back to the office before her and stolen her story. The Golden Age Superman is not only uninterested in Lane's approaches, but he treats her with disdain and considers her a silly woman. It is not until a storyline in 1996, after it is revealed to Lane that Superman and Kent are in fact the same person, that they do marry.

Although it is usual for most male superheroes, and superheroes in general, to be unmarried, some of them got married to their long-term girlfriends in the 1990s. Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris suggests that for superheroes, marriage is damaging to the before stable balance between the superhero and the alter-ego identities:

Even within the complexities of marriage narratives such as Clark Kent and Lois Lane or Mary Jane and Peter Parker, the public sphere takes precedence on both sides of the identity. The spouses find themselves negotiating fulfillment of the breadwinner role. In each case, such conflict ends up taking a backseat to the public persona of the superhero identity, the identity that serves as a replacement for the typical male's public duty and traditional patriarchal role within society. As such, the superhero in these cases is very much the embodiment of the traditional heritage of the dominant male within society's public needs, fulfilling an essentialist gender role that does not acknowledge the social constructions causing it to exist. (111-112)

While this is undoubtedly true for male superheroes, it is all the more accurate for female superheroes, where the breadwinner role is problematic even without a boyfriend, as women traditionally, and especially before the 1960s, were not considered by society to be viable for the breadwinner role. And it was because of this exact conflict, not between Wonder Woman's private and public persona, but rather between Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor, that her brief decision to marry Steve was such a disaster for her gender identity. From being a strong and independent superhero in the decade before, writer Robert Kanigher turned her into a classical, obsessed housewife so that Trevor, as the husband and man, could have the breadwinner role. The marriage storyline was abandoned shortly after, but not forgotten, and it is the Wonder Woman of the 1950s that has been the main contributor to her reputation as a patriarchal construct since then.

Despite this, however, the general result of the concept of the token boyfriend is a reversal of the traditional gender roles, assigning the dominant role, or the breadwinner role, to the female party, whereas the male counterpart in contrast become the supported and submissive half of the relationship. While the main purpose of the construct, according to Robbins, is to avoid accusations of lesbian tendencies, it also challenges gender roles and shows that the unfamiliarity of such an arrangement does not necessarily make it frightening or wrong to the young female reader. On this, as the only one of the three superheroes in this thesis with a stable relationship with her token

boyfriend, Wonder Woman again challenges patriarchal constructs and emerges as a feminist ideal.

## 1.9 Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I would like to start with another quote by Taylor: “As comics remain largely ghettoized in North America after almost a century –popularly regarded as infantile subliterate– their ability to impress upon cultural norms remains quite limited” (346). In recent years, the academic field of literary scholarship has gradually opened up for new kinds of popular literature, such as comics and graphic novels, and while superhero comic books are still considered less interesting than other forms of comics and graphic novels, this is gradually changing, and compared to underground commix and some graphic novels, the superhero comic book genre reaches an exponentially larger number of readers, consisting especially of adolescent boys, which makes it a medium with a big influence. Even more recently, the comic book industry has had great success with live action movies of their most popular superheroes, and the movie industry influences a larger audience still, so I would disagree with Taylor that the influence of comics is inconsequential, and argue that considering what stereotypes and gender identities comics promote is absolutely important.

Wonder Woman, then, with the longest and most consistent publication history of all female superheroes, must be considered one of the most important female characters and influences in the superhero genre, and therefore the most obvious character to examine. Having looked at how different artists have been major influences on the way her identity and independence as a woman is perceived, it is important to acknowledge that any conclusive argument can be contradicted based on deviant representations of the character, such as the highly sexualized version drawn by Deodato Jr., which, seen as a singular entity would result in a widely different conclusion. In a search for a more expanded view, however, ranging from Peter’s girlish features to Chiang’s almost masculine body image, the overall impression is not as negative. As will become evident

the next chapter, the appearance of other female superheroes range from better to much worse in terms of bodily ideals, and while recognizing a bigger problem does not remove the urgency of examining the details, it is necessary to acknowledge that the objectification and sexualizing of female superheroes goes beyond Wonder Woman, and challenging these boundaries and stigmas is difficult but just as important.

In this chapter I have compared Wonder Woman to the two most well known male superheroes of the genre with a similar publication history, to look at any differences or disadvantages on behalf of a female superhero. Surprisingly, though, the difference was not always to Wonder Woman's disadvantage, such as the expansion of Robbins' term token boyfriend to relate to male superheroes as well, and realizing that without a token girlfriend, Bruce Wayne/Batman has struggled to retain a convincing heterosexual identity. Diana Prince/Wonder Woman always had Steve Trevor, and in deciding against getting married because her duty as a superhero was more important to her than a romantic relationship, Wonder Woman kept her integrity as a woman more forcefully than did Batman.

Examining the costume and weapons shows that the male superheroes' arsenal of weapons traditionally include more phallic weapons than does Wonder Woman's, but hers are no less effective, and in *Batman v Superman*, to revisit Albertson's argument that utilizing phallic weapons disagrees with Wonder Woman's identity and philosophy, carrying a sword and shield does challenge the gender stereotypes. As opposed to Marston's belief that women should rule the world, feminism in general is more interested in protesting the gender inequality and illuminate misogynistic and sexist tendencies. The ideal feminist world respects and values women independently of sex and gender or predisposed bias, but in the process of achieving this, it is important to not only express concern for the gender stereotypes, but to challenge them. Peters' take on Freud's argument that women who challenge these stereotypes are masquerading homosexual tendencies is disregarding the larger problem of female objectification and fails to realize that it is exactly by challenging the preexisting gender stereotypes that the issue will be recognized and eventually resolved. Even Beauvoir allows for a few women to succeed in showing true independence and agency, and they do so precisely by challenging the preexisting conditions.

## 2 Chapter two – She-Hulk

### 2.1 Introduction

With a shorter publication history than Wonder Woman, She-Hulk has not been subject to as many radical changes over the years, but the different versions are nonetheless diverging, and the opinions about her identity as a female superhero disagree as much as those relating to Wonder Woman. Where neither Wonder Woman nor Black Widow has a male counterpart as is so common among female superheroes, She-Hulk is essentially a female version of the Incredible Hulk. Hypermasculine body representation is more or less standard among male superheroes, but the male Hulk is visually beyond hypermasculinity and edging towards what can only be described as monstrous. It stands to reason that a logical extension of this character in a female version should also be represented in a body of monstrous proportions, but that is not the case with She-Hulk, who is depicted in a highly feminine body that while more muscular than most female superheroes, does not even remotely resemble the Hulk's grotesque size and appearance. Following the argument from Chapter One, comparing Wonder Woman's body image to the bodies of professional body builders and a realistic physique for a woman performing supernatural tasks to save the world, She-Hulk's physique is once again less convincing than that of her male counterpart. The expectations of how a female superhero should look in relation to other male characters and –especially– male superheroes are not promoting healthy and realistic female characters, nor are they contributing towards a diverse and interesting cast of characters, an issue which shall be explored further in this chapter. As an extension of this, the question of what increases comic book sales with regards to development of a superhero character and identity will be raised, following a discussion about a statement by Marvel executive David Gabriel that female and cultural minority superheroes are unpopular among their readers. Is there a particular reason for this? I will proceed to argue that the practice of making female superheroes modeled on already existing male versions and assigning them a feminine name and costume is more typical than unique, and that making female characters modeled on male



identities commonplace serves toward an understanding that women in general lack an identity independent of male definition.

## 2.2 Creation

Whereas Wonder Woman came to life as a result of Marston's wish to create a strong female superhero, She-Hulk's creation was simply a calculated move in a copyright struggle. In the 1970s both Marvel Entertainment and Universal had their own versions of the male Hulk in comics and animated TV-series, and live-action TV-series respectively. When Universal began developing a female version of the Hulk to expand their franchise, Marvel hired Stan Lee to develop a female Hulk of their own before Universal, so as to keep the rights to both characters.

The only prerequisite to her creation, therefore, was that she was a female version of the original Hulk, preferably carrying a similar name due to copyright considerations. Extending the Hulk franchise with a female variant is not a unique process of creating female superheroes, but builds on a tradition of making female characters modeled on male originals since Superwoman appeared in 1943. Since then, a variety of what you might call secondary superheroes have been developed, such as Spider Girl, Spider-Woman, Ms Marvel, Batwoman and Thor Girl, who have all received framework and background mythology from their male counterparts. Conversely, though, no male superhero has been modeled on major and independent female superheroes such as Wonder Woman, but seem to be developed with original ideas and mythology.

Something else to keep in mind are the suffixes which these secondary female superheroes have generally been assigned. While some are addressed as "-woman", most are called "-girl", which suggests inferiority to all male superheroes, who are more or less consequently titled "-man". On occasion, a male superhero with the suffix "-boy" emerges, but they are often children, such as Superman's childhood identity, Superboy (much like Wonder Woman's "Wonder Girl" series). So where the "-boy" suffix indicates a child that would later grow up to a man, "-girl" is something a female superhero might have to carry with her for the duration of her life. This classification of some female

superheroes as inferior to their male counterparts seems like a reminder of the time when a woman passed from her father's care and into her husband's without ever becoming emancipated as a person unto herself. This substantiates a claim that a female superhero who receives her identity from a male version of the superhero name also becomes a subordinate in relation to that male superhero. Spider-Girl will always be Spider-Man's inferior, both in name and in terms of resources put into her creation and origin story.

Both in comic books and motion pictures, female superheroes have consistently been less commercially successful than male superheroes, a fact that comic book publishers have expressed publicly on several occasions. Considering this, one would expect that, when making the decision to create a female superhero, publishers would put a lot of work into developing the concept surrounding this new character to make certain that she is likeable. Again, this raises the question; to whom should she be likeable? The readership of comic books is, as previously mentioned mostly made up of white, adolescent, heterosexual males, and the representations of female characters tend to respond to this by being sexualized and having a less developed personality than the male characters. They are frequently presented as shallow characters with no ambitions beyond securing the affections of the male superhero, such as Lois Lane, who pines for Superman but cares little for anything else. She does not appear intelligent, and a lack of consideration for the consequences of her rash behavior in dangerous situations results in frequent rescue missions from Superman. Lois Lane appeared for the first time in 1938, three years before Wonder Woman, and since then the majority of female characters in comic books have been modeled on Lois Lane's shallow personality rather than on Wonder Woman's solid values and independent mindset. Considering the fact that most readers of comic books featuring a male superhero are teenage males, one would expect the majority of readers of comic books with female superheroes to be teenage females, with the same expectations for character identity and background as male readers in order to identify with the main character. However, as development of female superheroes does not seem to be a priority by the publishers, it is also understandable that females are in minority among comic book readers.

In terms of readership and visual representation, the way that (female) characters are pictured is highly relevant with regards to reader identification: "The cartoon is a **vacuum** into which our *awareness* and *identity* are pulled... an *empty shell* that we

inhabit which *enables* us to travel in *another realm*. We don't just *observe* the cartoon, we **become** it!" (McCloud 36) For any female readers, therefore, the importance of coming across relatable and likeable female characters cannot be overstated, and conversely, the lack of realistic and likeable female characters might either discourage any further reading or promote unhealthy and undesired values on behalf of their own sex.

Having made this observation, it is coherent to ask the question of whether female superheroes are less successful in the commercial market simply because most readers are male, or rather, is it that the development and resources that go into their creation is less convincing to the readers?

A recent article in *The Guardian* by Sian Cain raises the question of whether the lack of success for female and minority superheroes in the comic book business is the result of these types of characters' unpopularity among readers or the lack of originality put into the creation of these characters. According to Marvel executive David Gabriel, who is quoted in the article, "Any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up" (Cain). The article counters this argument, however, by using both tweets of general comic book readers who points to lack of originality even in Marvel's canon series and characters, as well as G Willow Wilson, the writer of the new Ms Marvel, a teenage Muslim girl called Kamala Khan, who has had a lot of success with readers: "A huge reason Ms Marvel has struck the chord it has is because it deals with the role of traditionalist faith in the context of social justice, and there was –apparently– an untapped audience of people from a wide variety of faith backgrounds who were eager for a story like this" (Cain). Whereas the first Ms Marvel (a title that changes main character regularly, like Doctor Who) was a secondary female character to the male Captain Marvel, the new character, Kamala Khan, was a carefully planned launch of a multicultural teenage girl in the context of a complex modern day society. In much the same way, the creation of Wonder Woman as recounted in the previous chapter was a process that creator William Moulton Marston developed for years. The sex, background history and general life philosophy of his superhero were planned in detail and with purpose, and it is widely accepted that Wonder Woman is the most successful female superhero of all time. Quantitatively, her comic book issue, notwithstanding the *JLA* publications, is the longest continuing publication history of any female superhero.

As the article in *The Guardian* seems to conclude, the problem might lay elsewhere than in the hands of comic book readership. Lack of original material and independent brands affect market value, and the habit of creating female superheroes as secondary identities defined by the male hero diminishes their own value, such as Supergirl, Superwoman, Batgirl, Spider-Girl and She-Hulk, which all have been assigned canon and mythology from their male counterpart. A significant minority of female superheroes characterized as independent of male definition supports an attitude within the genre that the female identity is only defined by- and in relation to men.

## 2.3 Origin story

Jennifer Walters, the younger cousin of scientist and sometimes-Hulk Bruce Banner, works as a criminal lawyer in Los Angeles. During a visit from her cousin, Walters is shot and requires a blood transfusion from her cousin to save her life, and his gamma-radiated blood turns her into a female Hulk when she becomes angry. In his article "Paradox and Patriarchy: A Legal Reading of She-Hulk," Dale Mitchell compares this transfusion of blood to the rib of Adam that was used to create Eve; "She-Hulk is a literal and metaphorical creation of man. As Eve was born from the rib of Adam, so Jennifer's affliction was born from Bruce Banner's (*The Incredible Hulk*) genetic material" (449). Like so many other female superheroes before her, She-Hulk's identity is defined only in comparison to that of a male character, and in the same way that woman, according to Beauvoir, represents a 'lack' against which men defines their identity, so She-Hulk is a lack against which the Hulk defines his. Metaphorically, the lack here is the "rib" that Adam loses in order to give life to Eve, whereas Hulk loses some of his unique blood in the transfusion that saves Walters' life and gives birth to the new She-Hulk identity. In the process, Hulk's personal identification with his own brand is sacrificed on behalf of the new female addition to that identity, in order to gain copyright claim to the entire Hulk-franchise for Marvel.

However, Beauvoir's statement can be taken even further by claiming that this "lack" in women against which men seeks to define themselves is mostly visible in the

difference in personality and body between male and female superheroes. Again the hypermasculinity of male superheroes becomes an identity by which to identify the hero amidst all other insignificant or secondary characters; a physique consisting of hard, clearly defined, and large muscles covered in a bright costume that serves to show off those muscles and confirm the hero's identity to the reader. The function of these attributes –to identify the hero and set him apart from the other characters in the reader's mind– should by extension also logically apply to female superheroes. They are assigned “glorified swimsuits” with bright colors as costumes for identification purposes, but the hypermasculine muscles convincing the reader of the main character's validity as a realistic superhero are replaced with hyperfeminine features for the female superhero, almost as if the reader needs confirmation that she is an actual woman. The slim and soft body of the female superhero serves as a binary against which the muscular and physically powerful male superhero stands out and identifies himself as male.

A similar binary is visible in the personality difference between male and female superheroes, where the female superheroes are, as previously mentioned, mostly the “Lois Lane-type”, who are focused on their love life and the affections of the superhero more than they are interested in fighting crime or pursuing some vision of their own. In addition to this, even the successful and independent female superheroes such as Wonder Woman, who finds crime fighting more interesting than her relationship with Steve Trevor, seems to consistently keep to a code of ethics about their treatment of criminals and supervillains that is significantly “softer” in comparison to the general male superhero's treatment of criminals. As will be more clearly discussed in the next chapter, Black Widow appears almost masculine in the ruthless way she deals with criminals and does not shrink from killing, whereas Wonder Woman had been published for 64 years before her first kill, maintaining a fair and generous treatment towards her opponents and enemies. Among male superheroes, however, killing and generally rough behavior is not uncommon, and I will argue that it is precisely this clear difference between “hard” and “soft” personalities that are frequently used to define a superhero. The male superheroes are defined through comparison with “soft” and feminine female superheroes (the softness representing the lack against which they define their identity), and the female superheroes are characterized as female precisely because they are *not* “hard” and masculine. This signifies a double standard in terms of

the definition of a superhero, and prompts the question of whether both of these characteristics define a superhero, and furthermore, if a male can be characterized as a superhero if he is not clearly masculine, and conversely, if a female can be defined as a superhero if she is masculine in body type and personality.

Another significant difference between the male and female version of the Hulk is evident in the titles by which She-Hulk was first known. Bruce Banner's comic book had always been known as *The Incredible Hulk*, whereas Walter's was introduced as *Savage She-Hulk*, presenting the character as more of a primal beast than a superhero. Where "incredible" has a positive meaning, "savage" is definitely a negative term and often associated with racial discrimination. When Bruce Banner transforms into the Hulk, he loses control and becomes a being that is entirely without boundaries, breaking everything in its path. She-Hulk, on the contrary, maintains her integrity and control, but has a higher level of aggression towards other people and the world. And yet, when these two characters are given individual publications, the publisher decides to define their identities as "incredible" and "savage", as if She-Hulk belongs to the old world definition of inferior races and lacks the ability to comprehend the notion of civilized heroism. Again, the racial perspective places She-Hulk, as a female character, in the inferior position to her male counterpart, despite the fact that it is the male Hulk who acts the most savage of the two. Yet, labeling the female negatively in this way emphasizes the different ways in which female characters are visually and narratively judged by both creators and readers of superhero comic books.

In *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown suggests that She-Hulk as well as the Hulk and a group of other superheroes such as Mystique, Nightcrawler and Silver Surfer represent a minority of "heroes of color" (172). The most prominent superheroes are Caucasian, and according to Brown, this has never really been an issue, however, should these colored heroes be subject to analytical scrutiny, an objection can be made that as representatives of a colored minority in superhero comic book literature, they all have Caucasian features apart from skin color, which devalues the concept altogether (173). For She-Hulk, who in the form of Jennifer Walters is clearly Caucasian, the question is not whether she is a convincing representative of the multi-cultural superhero, but rather a reminder of the fact that she belongs to yet another minority; the colored superhero. Combined with the description as "savage", though, the color adds to the before mentioned element of

racial discrimination suggested against She-Hulk in comparison to the male Hulk. This can be seen in connection with the function of the superhero costume as a signifier for the superhero's identity, and in terms of race, the skin color is the first thing noticed by an onlooker, especially one with a racist perspective, and thereby the first identifier of She-Hulk. The color green is a major part of her identity as a superhero, and becomes a signifier for her identity, in the same way that it contributes towards discrimination to a much more significant degree than does the male Hulk's color, precisely because of the added label "savage" used about She-Hulk.

The choice of color is important, and as she was created to represent a female version of the Hulk, the choice of color originates from his iconic green. Traditionally, green is associated with nature, growth and fertility, but also with jealousy, and in psychology it is used therapeutically, as it is said to have a calming effect. And while both characters seemed to lose their control and levelheadedness in their Hulk persona, Mike Madrid describes She-Hulk's behavior as a "perpetual state of PMS" (255). PMS is associated with groundless anger and irritability controlled by hormones rather than the individual herself, and is often used to explain aspects of a woman's behavior that men considers to be irrational. This anger and irritability would correspond with Jennifer Walters' She-Hulk persona, but whether it is right to label a female character with such a term as long as there is a corresponding male character with even more violent anger management issues who does not carry a similar label, is definitely a valid question. The lack of a similar term to assign to the male Hulk aside from having a badly controlled temper is significant and consistent with corresponding findings in the double standard so far. Furthermore, connecting the label PMS to the prefix "savage" suggest an opinion that PMS causes women to behave more like uncivilized beasts than rational human beings and categorizes She-Hulk as more of a monster than the male Hulk, which is a clear misogynistic classification.

## 2.4 The identity of She-Hulk

The first chapter discussed the different sides of a superhero's identity, and the distance that often becomes evident between the alter ego identity and the superhero identity. In the case of She-Hulk, Jennifer Walters is organized, well dressed and feminine, whereas her She-Hulk persona is messy, out of control and dressed in rags, and while both of them are the same person, there is a significant gap between the two personalities.

Stan Lee, creator of both Hulk and She-Hulk, expressed in an interview that as inspiration for the character of Hulk, he used both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (cited in Rhoades 80). The significance of this comparison has been examined more than once, but never in relation to She-Hulk, which I will do here, notwithstanding, however, an initial summary of what has been written about this in terms of the Hulk is useful. In his article "The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age" Adam Capitalino discusses the parallels of the transformation of the Hulk with the development and imminent threat of the nuclear age, comparing the instability of the Hulk's gamma radiated blood with the atomic bomb. In the real world, where the threat of nuclear war has been imminent for the past sixty years, a fear of atomic weapons resonates in the reader when observing the raw physical force of the Hulk. This connection invites reader identification in living with Banner's constant risk of turning into a green monstrosity outside of his control, very similar to the fear of atomic warfare. While arguably less monstrous, She-Hulk is still just as outwardly green as the Hulk, and the same references to nuclear weapons seem to apply. Walters, though not a scientist, is a lawyer, a profession which is traditionally as far from dirty monstrosities as scientists, if not more, so the duality of the Doctor and the monster still works for She-Hulk.

There are several reasons for why She-Hulk is less monstrous than the male Hulk. First, when the otherwise smart and considerate Banner is in his Hulk-form, he is constantly angry, a form of anger that exceeds reasonable human rage, while Walters' behavior as She-Hulk is more of a general irritation or mild anger compared to her male counterpart. In addition to this, and perhaps a more quantifiable quality, Banner's intelligent mind seems to disappear when his body is taken over by the Hulk, and the result is that the Hulk can only form incomplete sentences or single words, whereas



Walters' mind is clearly present and active in her She-Hulk form, and she talks perfectly and intelligently in spite of the anger. Returning to the analogy of *Frankenstein*, it is in fact She-Hulk who appears closer to the intelligent, sensitive monster, and despite Shelley's overturning of the typical roles of monster and creator, it reverses the interpretation of the male Hulk as the more monstrous of the two. Banner/the male Hulk becomes the creator, and She-Hulk emerges as the monster, extending into the realm of the monstrous-feminine through her hyperfeminine body, which will be discussed further in a separate section of this chapter.

The most common trait of the superhero is superhuman powers of some sort, although it is possible to be a superhero without them, like Batman. But when the superpower comes from being frightening, massive and destructive, is a simpleminded or an intelligent version the most effective? As a superhero, the use of deduction and reasoning is helpful in the process of saving people or doing superhero deeds, which might make Walters' less brutal and more considerate superhero the "best" version of Hulk. However, the genre seems to call for hyper masculine and physical superiority rather than psychological, and typically women end up with the softer/weaker and more considerate superpowers, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Therefore, in the eyes of the adolescent male comic book reader, the male Hulk is the more powerful of the two.

The other parallel from Capitalino's article is Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, comparing Banner's scientist persona with Dr. Jekyll and the Hulk's monstrous tendencies to Mr. Hyde. A similar comparison can be made for She-Hulk, taking the dual personality of the superhero more literally, and making She-Hulk an inner threat of more sinister proportions. This correlates to the analysis of the green monster as the threat of a nuclear incident, and the alter-ego persona as the calm and safe alternative of the two. The Hulk/She-Hulk is the threat of Mr. Hyde, of the atomic bomb, and of a situation getting out of control. They represent a world without order where chaos prevails, whereas the corresponding alter-egos of Banner and Walters are representatives of Dr. Jekyll, of order and civilization. The duality can very much be interpreted as a form of schizophrenia made manifest, much as in Stevenson's novel, but in the medium of superhero comics it is put into a simpler form for younger readers to experience.

## 2.5 Body image

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the female superhero body is a balancing act between being muscular enough to manage the superhuman tasks required to be a superhero, and adhering to the expectation of femininity from contemporary society. With Wonder Woman, the nature of that balance depended on which artist was responsible for the series at the time, but with She-Hulk, a comparison with the male Hulk is just as interesting. If male superheroes such as Superman and Batman present an exaggerated version of the male fitness ideal through their extremely muscled bodies, Bruce Banner's Hulk persona has entered a state where fitness becomes



Figure 9

monstrosity. His body is muscled, yes, and his biceps are definitely bigger than his head, but his extremities bear a much closer resemblance to that of a fairy tale troll or a giant. When we compare this monstrous body to that of She-Hulk, the differences are significant. Although bigger and more powerful than “regular” males and females both, Jennifer Walter's body as She-Hulk is not an extreme version of the female fitness ideal, nor is it monstrous or resembling a troll in any way. It is an averagely muscled, enlarged female body with big breasts and large buttocks, features that tend to naturally diminish with an increased muscle mass simply because they mostly consist of fat.

When examining Figure 9 and 10 more closely, a number of similarities and differences emerge. Firstly, both figures are dressed in a ripped piece of clothing, and the Hulk is wearing a pair of pants that has magically increased in size with his transformation and that still fits, albeit a little tightly,



Figure 10

whereas She-Hulk appears to have been wearing a dress that did not increase in size, but ripped both across her chest to expose parts of her breasts as well as just below her hips to become a revealing garment resembling the obligatory female superhero swimsuit costume. With the fit of that ripped dress, performing any movements aside from walking will be difficult without exposing any more of her body than she already is.

Secondly, the difference in body image on the two figures is remarkable. On the male Hulk all muscles are clearly defined and visible, and the body appears to be entirely without fat. She-Hulk, on the other hand, is tall and slim, but while some muscles are visible on her calves, she does not appear muscular, nor does she seem particularly monstrous in comparison, on the contrary, she displays a classic example of hyperfeminine features. She resembles any female character with the added attributes of hyperfeminine features such as big breasts, a small waist, wide hips and slim, elegant

limbs. Compared to most other characters she is somewhat larger, but significantly smaller than the monstrous proportions of the male Hulk.

She-Hulk's body is also noteworthy in terms of dominant readership and the production of female superheroes. As previously mentioned, it is understood to be a greater risk to produce female superheroes than male superheroes, mostly because of a predominantly male readership, and it is this majority of male readers that seems to be the reason why She-Hulk is less monstrous than feminine in physical appearance.

Another noteworthy consequence of She-Hulk's hyperfeminine body is the readership it invites. Returning to McCloud's argument about reader identification, the sexualized version of She-Hulk would not necessarily draw in new female readers, but serve as a secondary character in the male Hulk's shadow, and invite the desire of the adolescent male rather than the identification of a female reader.

## 2.6 The abject

Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject can be described as an object or a substance that the body or the subjective 'I' instinctively expels from itself and finds revolting once separate from the body, thus it becomes an object and not part of the subject. It can be bodily fluids, of which Kristeva categorizes excrement and menstrual blood as the most abject. Mitchell briefly offers an interpretation that the blood transfusion between Banner and Walters combined with Walters' mood swings (PMS) can be seen as menstrual imagery, and considers this in relation to other aspects of the character that appears abject (462). Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* describes the abject in relation to menstrual blood like this: "Menstrual blood [...] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (71). Jennifer Walters and She-Hulk are two identities in one, with two different bodies. She-Hulk is "the danger issuing from within" Jennifer Walters' body and identity, as the analogy of nuclear weapons attempted to demonstrate, and through the overly muscled, although feminine, body of She-Hulk, the internal

differences between the sexes, such as menstrual blood, is made manifest and visible. Walters' hyperfeminine exterior symbolizes the superficial and harmless body, whereas She-Hulk's monstrously green body and raging personality represent the abject, the expelled identity of the self that is no longer harmless, but becomes a threat to the existence and identity of the self. The male Hulk could not be subject to the same analysis simply because according to Kristeva, sperm does not represent a similar threat to the self, whereas menstrual blood brings to mind the *vagina dentata* of Creed's monstrous-feminine and the threat of the vagina representing a woman's fertility. Seeing as She-Hulk has been presented as a hyperfeminine character clearly designed to invite male desire from the readers, most males find the thought of menstrual blood if not revolting, then definitely not sexually attractive. In this the monstrosity of She-Hulk becomes manifest, because she represents not only a green superhero monster, but also the revolting sides of woman, and the main difference between the Hulk and She-Hulk, which is in fact their sexes. Following Kristeva's argument of sexual difference, the threat and monstrosity that She-Hulk really represents, is the threat of her own sex. The difference between the attractive Walters and the monstrous She-Hulk is that She-Hulk manifests the primal fear of the female sex.

Jean-Jacques Lefrère has written an entire article about the significance of blood transfusions in comic books in terms of influencing children and young adults who will later become blood donors. The article is relevant for this chapter because he spends some time looking at what blood can symbolize in comics (165). He claims that blood often goes hand in hand with violence in superhero comics, and that most blood transfusions are also transfusions of superpowers, where the majority comes in the appearance of pollution, and "infects" the recipient with superpowers. Banner's gamma radiated blood is not healthy blood, and because it is required to save Walters' life, the choice is between death and pollution. Choosing pollution for her, Banner makes her into the same kind of monster as he is himself, and forces her to live with the consequences. Ironically, though, it is only after the pollution of Banner's blood that Walters becomes the She-Hulk representing the threat of menstrual blood and the abject in female identity.

Another interpretation of the blood transfusion is the taboo of incest, as Banner and Walters are cousins. Kristeva likens the act of incest to the old sin, and therefore to primitive man, which again returns us to the prefix of *Savage She-Hulk* that appeared on

the first issues of the comic. Seeing as the act of incest requires two parties, and Banner made the active decision to give Walters his blood instead of letting her die, it would seem logical to hold him responsible for the metaphorical sin of the act of incest, however, it is Walters, who was unconscious at the time, who is labeled with the primitive prefix.

In a compilation of *She-Hulk* issues 1-6 from 2015 named *She-Hulk: Law and Disorder*, Jennifer Walters works as a lawyer in “Paine & Luckberg, LLP.”, and is called in for a meeting with the board where she expects to receive a bonus, having done her job excellently and having billed an impressive number of hours. However, the board informs her that far from expecting her to do her job, they hired her in hopes that she would bring in big clients from her job in the Avengers; Tony Stark and the like: “While we appreciate your diligence, Ms. Walters, you were not hired to bill hours and work cases. We have *lawyers* for that,” one of the board members explains to her (Soule). Even as a lawyer, then, she is seen as someone who does not belong or fit in, and when she fails to provide new and profitable clients, she is, like the abject, expelled from the corporate body and treated as an outcast. While Jennifer’s secretary is female, she herself is the only female lawyer seen in the company, and as such, the treatment she receives from the board consisting of exclusively male members, can also be seen to represent the role of women in high-profiled male dominated professions. As a woman, the fact that she does her job in equal measure or even better than her male counterparts is irrelevant, and once she fails the unrealistic expectations of a male supervisor or boss, she will be reprimanded and even fired. In some male dominated professions and businesses, women are treated as the abject, and this particular scene in *She-Hulk* exemplifies that by using a female character with green skin to highlight the issue.

Mitchell argues that “[She-Hulk] is a product of patriarchy, literally and metaphorically defined by narratives of sexualization. She-Hulk becomes the abject by a means of freeing herself from a system that constructs, labels and identifies her by reference to sex” (474). Through her involvement in that system, She-Hulk is already different from the patriarchy, but when she decides to go against the expectations of her sex, she truly becomes the abject, as when discussing with the board members and resigning in protest to their treatment of her (sex). Even her superhero name She-**Hulk** derives from the male form **Hulk**, as **woman** does from **man**, and thus establishes her

relation to the patriarchy as a mere sub-genre of the original Hulk. It is true as Mitchell points out that she does not merely become a passive victim of patriarchal rule, but through challenging limits and gender stereotypes she becomes the abject rather than an icon of freedom and strength such as Wonder Woman. Why is this, then? As previously mentioned, She-Hulk's creation was the result of a copyright issue rather than the wish to provide young female readers with a good role model, and the two origin stories are quite different. The issues of *Wonder Woman*, particularly during the Marston-era, featured frequent references to "the world of man", "equal rights for women" and so on, as well as using Wonder Woman to enforce values and justice on behalf of women. *She-Hulk* makes no claims to right the inequalities between the sexes nor does she use words to that effect, but Walters seems generally concerned with injustice independent of sex or skin color, and precisely because she considers injustice against her rights as a woman in the same category as injustice in general, the difference seems lost on the reader as well.

As mentioned, it is She-Hulk's identity as a female character and the representation of the abject in internal sexual difference that makes her the true abject. As a woman she signifies the threat of the castrating *vagina dentata*, of woman's ability to procreation, and the revolting in childbirth. The very lack of the phallus is what makes the female a symbol of the abject, and where the menstrual blood is both disgusting and a signifier for the fertility of the woman, and therefore the abject, the act of procreation makes woman a threat. As a woman, She-Hulk is a signifier for the abject, and by challenging the limitations of her sex in terms of her profession, she becomes the true abject by embodying the difference between the sexes and amplify the disgust and fear of the patriarchy.

One of the means by which She-Hulk intensifies this fear and disgust of the abject in woman, is through the very hyperfeminine exterior presented visually. As seen in Figure 8 and discussed in the section about body image, She-Hulk is drawn with exaggerated feminine features such as breasts, hips and buttocks, features that while traditionally associated with sexist representation of female characters, also increases the very features that represent her fertility and potential as a maternal figure, which is essentially what is abject about woman, and also what makes She-Hulk as representative of both the abject and the monstrous-feminine, which will be examined further in the next section.



## 2.7 The monstrous-feminine

Despite not being as monstrous in the physical and colloquial sense as the Hulk, She-Hulk is, in many ways and as previously argued, more monstrous than the Hulk because she is a representative of the monstrous-feminine. Mitchell has suggested such an analysis in relation to patriarchal law; however, I wish to extend this interpretation a bit further here. Firstly, Mitchell argues that She-Hulk represents the monstrous-feminine in terms of having a green, monstrous body, but I want to emphasize her identity as a woman, and the female body as the monstrous-feminine in addition to her physique and skin color. The difference will be that while Jennifer Walters in Mitchell's analysis is only a representative of the monstrous-feminine in her form as She-Hulk, but I argue that as a woman, she is the monstrous-feminine in both her capacity as a superhero and as her alter ego Jennifer Walters.

According to Barbara Creed, who bases her conclusions on Jaques Lacan using a psychoanalytical standpoint, the foremost reason that women are seen as the monstrous-feminine is the lack of a penis and the subsequent unconscious male fear of the *vagina dentata*, the castrating teathed vagina. She also references one of Lacan's theories that large or prominent women seem to be more threatening to men in general (106). Following this reasoning, Jennifer Walters poses a significantly larger threat to the patriarchal forces in her She-Hulk persona and –physique, than do any other female superhero that retains their human form regardless of superpowers. In an attempt to neutralize this, or make her less threatening, writers and artists of *She-Hulk* have regularly had Walters featuring on the front page in either her She-Hulk persona or as herself, wearing only underwear or completely nude, where she has even broken the fourth wall of literature and expressed frustration that she has to reduce herself to such degrading activities just to sell issues of her own comic book (Figure 11). While I have argued that visually enhancing She-Hulk's feminine features emphasizes the patriarchal fear of her as the abject and a representative of the maternal and the *vagina dentata*, exposing and ridiculing that same body by forcing her to strip on the front page of her



own comic book goes some way towards defusing that fear. By turning the hyperfeminine body into an object of ridicule and male desire, the symbolism of the monstrous-feminine becomes less pressing as that same body is metaphorically and literally stripped of her intimidating figure as a superhero and becomes an object within male control.

Even when she is not in her superhero persona, Walters represents almost an irregularity in the world of man, as previously mentioned when discussing her dismissal from the law firm. Both as a human with supernatural powers in a world of mostly ordinary people, but also as a woman in the world of men,

Walters struggles with prejudice and dismissal by men. A little later in the same issue of the comic book, Walters finds herself involved in a law suit against fellow Avenger Tony Stark/Iron Man, and when she attempts to talk to Stark in a civil capacity, she is dismissed by guards, robots and Stark himself, as if her interest in standing up for her client is silly, and addressed as someone who simply does not understand the formal order of a law suit. This is very representative for the way that women are treated in some professions and businesses, even though they are more than qualified to do their jobs and equally accomplished and educated as men on the same level. Mitchell argues that “She-Hulk becomes the abject as a means of freeing herself from a system that constructs, labels and identifies her by reference to sex” (474). By acknowledging her identity as a woman and rebelling against the system of male opposition in her profession, Walters/She-Hulk amplifies the male perception of her as the monstrous-feminine, and becomes the very object that the subjective system finds disgusting and attempts to expel from itself, thereby making her the abject. In the episode involving



Figure 11

Tony Stark, Walters has to resort to transforming into She-Hulk in order to overpower the robot guards and approaching Stark's office. In doing so, she uses her role as a superhero to challenge boundaries once again, and intensifies her signification of the abject by breaking these boundaries in a monstrously hyperfeminine body.

Both Creed and Kristeva emphasizes the threat of the maternal, in terms of the *vagina dentata* and the taboo of reproductive mothers in different cultures around the world. It is not necessarily the *mother* that elicits the fear, but the potential for reproduction and fertility in the female sex in general. The fear of the *vagina dentata* is a primal fear of the female sexual organs resulting from a childhood understanding of how the mother lacks a penis, and transforming this understanding into a fear of the castrating vagina that the mother therefore must possess, according to Creed's analysis of Freud (105). All women, therefore, can represent the monstrous-feminine in terms of the fear of the mother, as the vagina represents both the castrating mother and the fertility of the female sex.

In her role as a superhero, She-Hulk represents the result of a metaphorical act of incest between Walters and her cousin Banner, and the difference in visual representation from Walters to She-Hulk is amplification of all feminine traits as well as muscles and height. This enlarging of the superhero version, as before mentioned, is, according to Lacan a trait which can symbolize the monstrous-feminine in that men find large or prominent women more threatening. By both enlarging her size and her feminine features as well as allowing for the strength and power to battle her way through a small army of male guards, the striking difference between Walters and She-Hulk is also the difference between most women and the true image of the monstrous-feminine.

## 2.8 Costume

It is worth remarking on the costume of She-Hulk too, or, at times, the lack of one. In cases where there is time to dress the part, her superhero costume is a white swimsuit with black or purple details, featuring the signature cut of most female superhero

costumes; small, revealing panties and significant cleavage (Figure 12 and 13). Madrid refers to this standardized female superhero costume as somewhat of a double standard compared to what male superheroes usually wear; a leotard that while tight, also covers up most parts of the body. The female superhero's swimsuit is not only revealing, but clearly designed to serve male desire: "the majority of [...] comic book heroines wear some variation of a swimsuit, meant to make them look dynamic, but also attractive to a mostly male audience. Like the business executive in her pencil skirt and pumps, the superheroine must do her job, but still present herself in an often hyper-feminized way. She has to play by the rules of the game" (289). The parallels to Walter's profession as a lawyer and the strict dress codes of most law firms, especially promoting revealing, feminized skirts, blouses and dresses to the female executives and lawyers, are significant in this analysis. This promotion of women as an object of desire is emphasized twice in *She-Hulk: Walters'* everyday clothes and She-Hulk's superhero costume. In an extension of this, it is also important to take into account the fact that every time Walters has to turn into She-Hulk unexpectedly, she does not wear her suit underneath her work clothes the way that Superman does, but simply transforms into her much larger, monstrous body, and rips her clothes into barely recognizable scraps of fabric. While Banner's Hulk persona seems to have a pair of shorts or short jeans that always fit him when changing from human to Hulk, Walters has to plan her change and bring along her superhero swimsuit in order to look appropriately dressed. If not, the already feminized clothes she wears to the office every day become even more revealing when ripped apart by the transformation, as seen in Figure 9.



Figure 12





Figure 13

Furthermore, whereas the lack of a decent costume is interesting, the lack of clothing altogether should be considered as well. As previously mentioned, Walters/She-Hulk has been featured naked or almost naked on the front page of her own comics on more than one occasion, an objectification of the female body that is excessive and extreme even for female superhero standards. The obvious reference to stripping in order to sell more comics is a representative impression of the comic book genre as having a male dominated readership, and it adheres to an assumption that girls/women do not read superhero comics, and if they do,

they are neither interested in female superheroes nor likely to identify with such characters. It also sets a certain standard for the much discussed, heterosexual, adolescent male as a reader of comics and later on in life as a man living alongside women. To the occasional minority of young female readers, this representation of their own sex, if not shocking and revolting, brings them to assume that even as adults, this kind of objectification of their sex is acceptable, and resigns them to become passive victims of similar treatment in both professional and private spheres.

Marvel actually released a “swimsuit edition” of their most prominent female superheroes, a gimmick on Playboy’s magazines, and if that does not sexually objectify the female superhero, there is not much that does. She-Hulk featured on the front page of this, and it will be safe to say that it forms the absolute lowest point of her publication history. Figure 12 is an example of this, showing She-Hulk wearing minimalistic

underwear and posing suggestively. When discussing Wonder Woman's different costumes with regards to various artists and eras, all of her outfits featured distinctively more fabric and modesty than She-Hulk is wearing in Figure 5. Wonder Woman's set of morals and background from the Marston era contrasts strongly with this image of She-Hulk as an object of male desire rather than a subjective being and an independent superhero. With regards to the "swimsuit edition", Marvel has never released a similar issue featuring male superheroes in correspondingly revealing poses, most likely because the majority of readers are male, but the double standard in relation to the sexes in comic books is still significant.



Figure 14



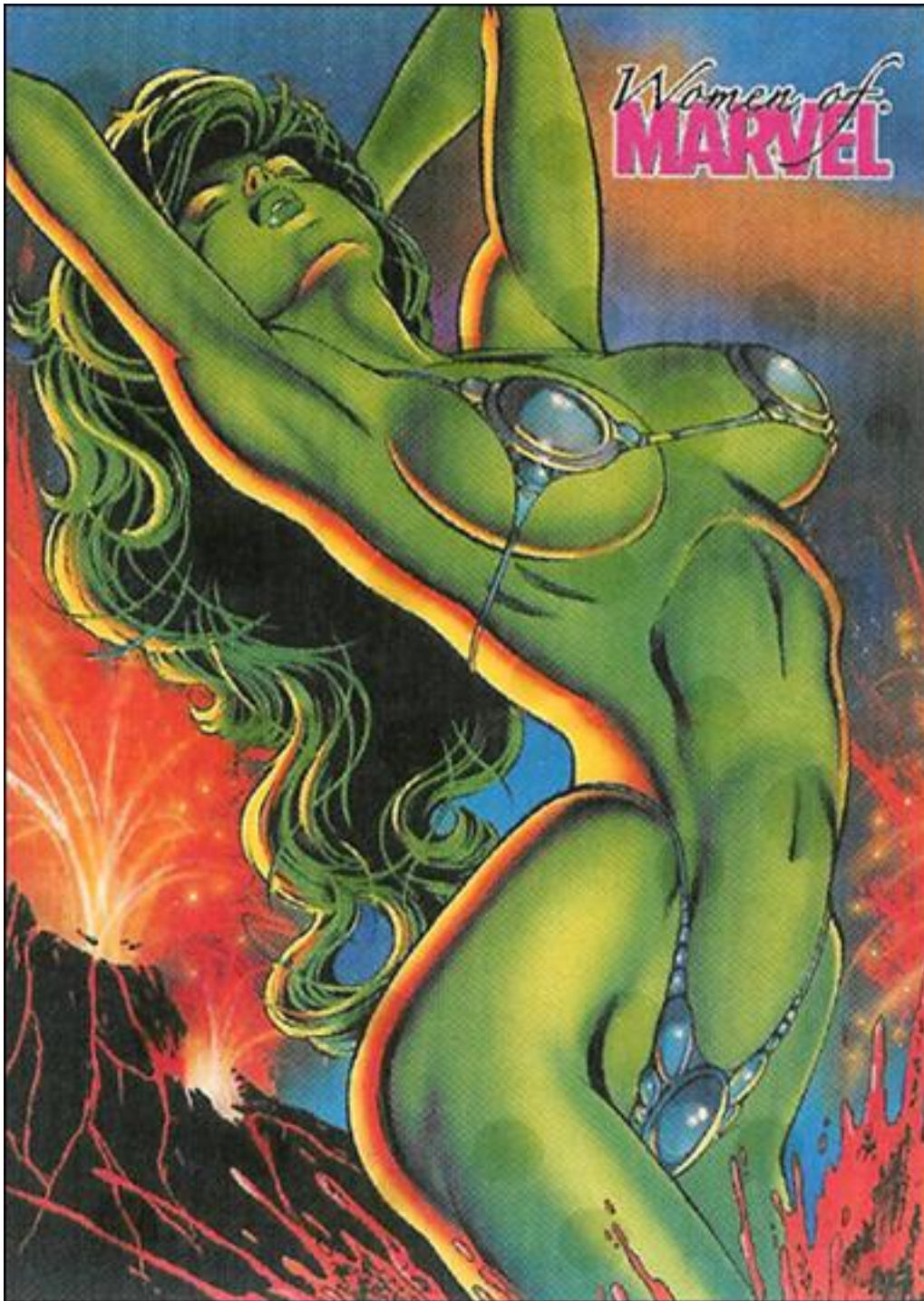


Figure 15

## 2.9 Conclusion

The most distinct difference between She-Hulk and Wonder Woman is not that Wonder Woman would never be featured in a DC Entertainment “swimsuit edition”, but that very example is a clear representation of that difference. First published in 1941 with original artwork and a complex background story, Wonder Woman is unfortunately somewhat unique in terms of female superheroes. The majority, including She-Hulk, receives their origin stories and artwork from already existing male superheroes, and assumes their identities in a bargain that forever renders them the metaphorical and commercial inferior of their male counterpart. Lacking more than just a phallus, these secondary female superheroes suffer from the absence of identity, and without originality and independent storylines, these female characters become “the other” in the superhero genre; a useless piece that once belonged to the subject but has now become expelled and a representative of the utterly abject.

# 3 Chapter three – Black Widow

## 3.1 Introduction

In many ways, *Black Widow* is different from both *Wonder Woman* and *She-Hulk*. Perhaps the most significant difference is the fact that she is not in possession of any supernatural powers, whereas *Wonder Woman* was born a god and Jennifer Walters transformed into *She-Hulk* because of Bruce Banner's contaminated blood transfusion. *Black Widow* is mortal, and while the others are too, she is more vulnerable as a regular human. That said, she has proved just as difficult to kill for any supervillain during her publication history. A publication history which is also quite different from the other two characters', because while *Black Widow* was created in 1964, she only appeared as a secondary character in the stories about other superheroes, or in issues of *The Avengers*, until the 1990s, when she debuted in her own series. Like most long-lived DC and Marvel characters, her publication history both within and outside of her own series has treated her differently and changed her story and timeline depending on the writer of each independent issue. There is, however, again like many other characters of similar publication histories, a few reemerging constants of her story that provide the character with an identity, such as her origin story and connection to the Avengers. To get as consistent an analysis as possible, this chapter will deal with *Black Widow's* identity and history in mostly general terms, and when a detailed analysis is done, it will be based on the most recent publication, the three-issue collection; *Black Widow: The Finely Woven Thread* (2014), *Black Widow: The Tightly Tangled Web* (2015) and *Black Widow: Last Days* (2015) by Nathan Edmondson, and also on some of the live action films that feature the character in recent years, such as *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The reason for including these films in the analysis is that they have made a great impact on comic book readers and the general public as well as caused an increase in new readers and influenced the development of the character in the comic books.



As previously mentioned, Black Widow is not a superhuman being, and one might make a valid argument that as a character she does not qualify as a superhero, because by definition superheroes are in possession of superhuman powers and abilities, something she does not have. However, as a member of the Avengers, she performs impressive or impossible feats side by side with superheroes with superhuman powers. Also included in the Avengers is Tony Stark/Iron Man, who is an ordinary human when he is not wearing the Iron Man suit, and Iron Man is referenced and categorized as a superhero quite frequently. Another interesting fact about the Avengers, especially considering the recent live-action movies, is that while there have been a number of female superheroes in the Avengers, such as She-Hulk, one of the most iconic members and the female member that most people remember is Black Widow. Apart from Nick Fury, the nearest supervisor of the team is Maria Hill, who is also a female character, and who features frequently in the *Black Widow* series by Edmondson. The live-action films have quite recently added the character of Scarlet Witch, also known from the Avengers, and these three women represent the female sex in the Avengers-franchise on-screen, if we disregard the “token girlfriends” in secondary roles.

The reason that Black Widow in particular is interesting is in part the fact that she features heavily in these films and is therefore very present in the contemporary peak in comic book sales and –popularity, which increases the potential for influencing young, female readers and viewers. As such, this chapter might just as well have looked at one of the female characters in the X-Men franchise, but Black Widow is interesting because of her origin and, I might add, especially because she is ordinary in a world of superhuman male characters and still able to represent herself as their equal.

## **3.2 Origin story**

Black Widow’s origin and creation owes much to the British newspaper comic spy Modesty Blaise, who was very popular at the time of Black Widow’s creation. The British spy was drawn exclusively in black and white, had a black suit and dark hair, and was both independent and good at her job. Much of this was adopted for Black Widow’s

identity, but her background was changed so that it fit with the times, and she became a Russian spy in the midst of the Cold War.

Natasha Romanova was born in Russia as an orphan and taken in by an organization known as “The Red Room”, where she was trained to become a Russian spy, which involved speaking several languages fluently, knowing different martial arts (much like Bruce Wayne/Batman’s training), and so on. She was originally introduced in *Iron Man* in 1964 as a Russian agent and an antagonist to Iron Man, but was later persuaded to abandon her Russian service and become a member of S.H.I.E.L.D., where she was recruited to join the Avengers. After her resignation from The Red Room, and learning the error of her ways, she started a sideline business doing private missions and putting her fees into a fund towards compensation for the families of her victims from her time as a Russian agent. A major part of her storyline in Edmondson’s *Black Widow* issues pertains to her conscience about the victims and their families.

In the period between her time as a Russian spy and a contract with S.H.I.E.L.D., Black Widow lived a life as a rich jetsetter and an independent woman, appearing in the issues of other superheroes such as Daredevil, with whom she had a brief romance. The time when she was a member of The Red Room and when she lived as a jetsetter align with the “good girl gone bad”-tendency in superhero comic books in the 1970s (Madrid 227), which involved previously straight-forward female superheroes becoming “bad”, either by possession, hypnotization, blackmail or other means of doing the wrong thing while still remaining believably good once the phase ended, such as coming back from being hypnotized. Black Widow’s period as a “bad girl” is her time as a Russian spy during the Cold War, and then defecting to American forces by seeing how her actions had been wrong. In line with other female superheroes, her life as a reformed agent after this seemed perfectly believable, even though she had been conscious and in control of herself in her bad girl-phase, contrary to most other “good girls gone bad” of the period. The reason I use the word believable is in reference to the treatment she was subject to during her time in The Red Room, similar to brain washing, which I will elaborate on shortly.

A very common part of a superhero’s background story and motivation is the loss of one or both parents. Bruce Wayne becomes Batman to avenge the murder of his parents; Superman’s parents die along with his native planet, a biological inheritance that makes him the most powerful being on earth and the reason for being a superhero.

Wonder Woman does not have a father, and her identity as the creation of two women growing up in a matriarchal society is the main source of her motivation to defend women's rights as a superhero. Then there is Black Widow, who, similarly, grew up in an orphanage that taught her not to connect with or trust anyone, which later became more or less her identity as an agent and a spy.

When Black Widow made her first appearance in 1964, the world had just survived the Cuban missile crisis, but the danger of the Cold War was still very much an issue, and in addition to this, John F. Kennedy had been shot the previous year, an assassination believed by many to be ordered by the Soviets. Into this, Black Widow's background seemed realistic and genuinely frightening, considering the very real danger of Soviet agents, and she served as a believable enemy to Iron Man and the rest of Marvel's superheroes. Once the dangers of the nuclear race cooled down towards the mid 1980s, her reformation and membership in S.H.I.E.L.D. also seemed genuine. While the world tried to recover from decades of distrust and potential danger, and some Soviets were pardoned and integrated into American society, so was Black Widow transformed into an agent fighting for the world's freedom and safety.

In Edmondson's *Black Widow: Last Days*, her background is explained and explored in relation to her present and the debt that she feels she owes the families of her victims. As a child she is familiarized with rich, violent men who take advantage of young, idealistic women and abuse them for protection. In an accidental entanglement with one of these men and his thugs, she gets hold of a gun and kills one of the thugs in self-defense. It frightens her, but she survives and returns to The Red Room, where the managers discuss the incident and her promising career in the spy business. The last story of the volume is about one of her first missions, in Cuba, where she uses psychological warfare to frighten a worried Cuban family of three that is trying to defect to America. She kills both parents, and is then asked to take out her classmate Marina, who has been living undercover in Cuba for some time, as well as Marina's boyfriend, and she shoots both in cold blood before returning to the extraction destination. These flashback sequences serve to substantiate the significance of Black Widow's need to make penance for her past, and also to demonstrate the kind of training and background that she has and its relevance for what she is doing in the present.

Something significant in relation to her backstory is also the fact that to everyone but her accountant, who handles the funds that go towards helping the families of her

victims, she does not talk about her past to anyone. Even though she was in fact a victim of The Red Room's manipulation herself, she feels shame for her background and her past actions, and chooses not to talk about it. Actually, in the opening sequence in *Black Widow: The Finely Woven Thread*, she distracts a suicide bomber from jumping off a building for long enough to capture him by telling him what he believes to be her background story, but then she finishes off by assuring him that it is not, adding that "No one will ever know my full story." Through this comment, she identifies herself as the unknown and Beauvoir's *other*, both in relation to the person in question, but also among her fellow superheroes. Her background as a spy and a villain naturally makes her an *other* as a superhero, and as is the case with Wonder Woman and She-Hulk, this otherness is complemented with the *other* that the female represents in a superhero setting.

The organization The Red Room is, in many ways, involved in human trafficking of its spies, considering that the spies are recruited as children, brought up to believe that they are working for a good cause, or if not, to never ask questions, and then they are deployed as deadly weapons for The Red Room's benefit. Their recruits are also young girls exclusively. As a part of this, rather than an enemy of the American state, Black Widow is a victim of physical and psychological abuse that has left its marks. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, she explains that once her training for The Red Room was complete, every girl went through what she refers to as a "graduation ceremony", which meant that she was sterilized before being assigned a mission, so that distractions such as a pregnancy would not be an issue. Seeing as these agents were females only, one could pose a question of whether such a procedure might be considered if they had been male, due to the social expectations that women bond more easily with their children than men because of the time spent in the womb. Forced sterilization of young women is a form of physical abuse, not to mention the rather sexist assumption that fertile women are somehow weak. This originates from an old belief that men are inherently and naturally stronger than women, both physically and mentally. Considering this theory, and the way that The Red Room has abused and coerced Black Widow to do its bidding, an argument can be made that the story of her transcendence from Soviet spy to American agent is also a story of enlightenment with regards to female liberation and equal rights for women, which, according to Wonder Woman, were to be found in America.

### **3.3 The superhero identity**

Depending on the medium or the issue, Black Widow's alter ego, or even real identity, is Natasha or Natalia Romanova, or Romanoff. This is interesting, because in Russian, women are traditionally given the female version of last names, such as Romanova, which would be the culturally and linguistically correct name for her. However, perhaps symbolically, she is more frequently known as Natasha Romanoff or Romanov: the male version of her last name. She is not married, which means that she has not taken the name of a husband, and she is very much a strong and independent woman who constantly makes a point of proving that she can take care of herself, hence the male last name. Her line of work, espionage, is traditionally known as a masculine profession, as demonstrated by the James Bond franchise, and the hyper-masculine character exploring classically male roles whilst objectifying women at a surprisingly high rate. Being a woman in this profession, especially one who seems equal to, and, perhaps even better than most men, having a masculine version of her last name symbolizes her strength and independence as a woman in a man's world.

Having said as much, I would like to argue that Black Widow does not have an alter ego to the same degree as other superheroes, especially the ones discussed in chapter one, where the classical alter egos of Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman represent the person they were before they assumed their superhero identity, and also a persona that they have to keep secret, so as not to be discovered and recognized as superheroes. Black Widow, on the contrary, is well known as Natasha Romanoff, and does not keep her name a secret, but rather the history behind her name. As Black Widow, her superhero persona, she does not have any secrets, except for a few secret identities, while as Natasha Romanoff, there are a lot of secrets, including the reimbursement fund for her victims. While Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent and Diana Prince are caricatures of their alter egos' perception of regular people, in order to fit in, Natasha Romanoff is just as smart, practical and independent as her superhero counterpart, and there is no difference between the two.

The superhero part of her identity, Black Widow, is a reference to spider imagery, much in the same way as Spider-Man. There is, interestingly enough, a female version of the male Spider-Man called Spider-Girl, but like She-Hulk, this is simply a female identity connected to the male version precisely by serving as a definition against which to define her identity. The implications of making female superheroes a second-hand version of the male superhero have been thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, but suffice it to say that the connection is very rarely in favor of the female superhero. Despite this, however, Black Widow has retained the spider-imagery, but is still in possession of her own, unique identity with no reference to a male counterpart by which to define her identity as a superhero or a woman against.

Having established this, it is also useful to look at the significance of using the spider imagery as a part of her identity itself. Contrary to Spider-Man, the name reference to Black Widow more specifically references a particular type of spider, no less than a well-known lethal spider. This is no coincidence, but a symbol of Romanoff's proficiency and deadliness. The spider is also known for being a species in which the female is bigger and more powerful than the male, and where the female is the only one lethal to humans. It is also a species known for sexual cannibalism, where the female kills the male after mating (hence Black *Widow*), and then she proceeds to raise her children independently. The reference to Romanoff's identity is significant here as well, more or less signaling the lack of an equal male counterpart, and her superiority with regards to the opposite sex. Her independence, like the spider's, might stem from her childhood, being surrounded exclusively by other females, and like Wonder Woman who grew up in a matriarchal society, she finds it difficult to connect with and value males as her equals. In addition to this, the animal imagery connected to superheroes like Black Widow, as expressed in Chapter One with Batman, symbolizes an *otherness* in the character, resulting in the realization that neither males nor other superheroes are her equals and emphasizing the divergence and isolation of the *other* in Black Widow.

Black Widow is also different, in the sense that most superheroes, male or female, who find themselves in possession of superpowers decide that the call to fight for justice is an obligation; that their ability to protect the world is also a responsibility to do so. Even superheroes without supernatural abilities, such as Bruce Wayne/Batman became a superhero in order to protect the world from the injustice that killed his parents. They feel an obligation and a calling to do the right thing. Wonder Woman is

sent to “man’s world” to protect “the last citadel of democracy and of equal rights for women” against the destruction of the war. She-Hulk finds herself in possession of the ability to protect those weaker than her against the prejudice and unfairness she was subject to as a woman before her transformation. Black Widow, on the other hand, has no superpowers, and despite the horrors of her upbringing and past, has no interest in protecting the world out of an obligation to do good. Her interest in working as an American agent and a position in the Avengers is purely based on enjoyment of her profession. She works as a spy because she enjoys it. Her obligation to atone for the atrocities of her past as a Russian spy, however, is another matter, and more in line with the motivation that most superheroes have to do miraculous deeds. She feels indebted to recompense the families of her victims for her actions in the past, and does so by working missions for payment that goes into funds for the benefit of these families. In order for the money to fulfill its purpose, the missions are picked carefully to make sure that it is not blood money. Her part-time engagement in the Avengers is nonetheless based purely on the satisfaction and thrill that she finds in her profession, which is also, conventionally speaking, untraditional for women in such a physically violent career.

These three factors: assigning her the male version of her last name, using the Black Widow-theme to signalize her superiority with regards to the other sex, and her passion for a line of work that involves violence and killing, suggests that as a character, she is meant to be perceived as more of a masculinized female rather than singularly as a female superhero.

### **3.4 Body image**

Like both Wonder Woman and She-Hulk, Black Widow’s physical appearance depends on which artist is drawing the comic book. What seems to be consistent, though, is her red hair. The color red traditionally signifies war, blood or courage, all traits that fit her personality and background history. It also serves as an identifier in terms of reader recognition, because the red hair is easily spotted and the character recognized as Black Widow. At the beginning of comic book printing, only the primary colors, or something

known as the “four color process” were used due to the cost of printing, which affected the iconic representation of the superhero:

To counteract the dulling effects of newsprint and to stand out from the competition, costumed heroes were clad in *bright, primary colors* and fought in a *bright, primary world!* The colors were picked for *strength* and contrasted strongly with one another, but on most pages no one color *dominated*. Without the *emotional impact of single-color saturation*, the *expressive potential* of American color comics was often cancelled out to an emotional grey. As always, there were some *exceptions*, but this was the overall trend. However, while comics colors were less than *expressionistic*, they were fixed with a new **iconic** power. Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to **symbolize** characters in the mind of the reader. (McCloud 188)

While this is mostly relevant to the first superheroes such as Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman, who originated around the 1940s, the tradition of using bright colors to identify the superhero still applies. As such, using the color red to signify Black Widow is not a random choice. While other superheroes are dressed in bright fabrics, Black Widow’s costume is consistently black because of her need as a spy not to be discovered; it is a form of camouflage. And again like the Black Widow spider, which is black with only a red hourglass on the back, the only colored accessory of her costume is a red hourglass belt buckle that appears in some versions, and her red hair. Following the previously discussed meaning of the color red as well as McCloud’s analysis of the color of the superhero costume signifying the identity of the superhero in the mind of the reader; then what the reader subconsciously identifies Black Widow with is blood, war and her deadly spider counterpart.

As discussed in the first chapter, the divergence between what the body of a female superhero that would realistically be able to perform heroic acts should look like, and the way that most female superheroes actually look, is surprisingly large. In relation to Black Widow, though, this difference is not as marked because of her lack of superpowers, and a corresponding lack of need to do superhuman deeds, which means that her physique is not required to look convincingly superhuman. As an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., she is required to know different kinds of martial arts, but she is not necessarily in need of the same physique as Superman or Wonder Woman, who frequently lift heavy objects, snap things in half or carry people while flying. Black Widow’s body could therefore look very differently from what Wonder Woman’s body



should ideally look like, and as such there is no unrealistic physique for Black Widow, but she would nonetheless be expected to be fit and healthy.

In relation to this, it is interesting to note that artist George Perez, who drew Wonder Woman and was mentioned in chapter 1 for drawing a heavily muscled version of her, has also drawn Black Widow in an issue of *Marvel Fanfare*, where she is portrayed just as muscled and fit, although still very feminized. Both bodies are very similar, and appear to be a kind of standardized physique used by Perez when drawing female superheroes, regardless of their abilities or level of activity. Now, whereas the previous paragraph argued that any physique would be suitable for Black Widow due to her profession as a spy rather than as a superhero, the argument from Chapter One still stands: it is physically impossible for a body maintaining that much muscle mass to also have the amount of fat tissue required for breasts and buttocks of such significant and feminine size.

Nonetheless, Perez' version is not representative for the general body image of Black Widow, and overall the character appears to be the least feminized female superhero in terms of physique of the three examined in this thesis, which correlates to the impression of Black Widow as masculinized compared to other female characters. Like



Figure 16: Perez' Black Widow. Notice especially thigh muscles and breast size.



Figure 17: Noto's Black Widow.

most aspects of the character, the body image also appears to value functionality above all else, which places the femininity in the background while more masculine and practical features are brought to the front. In fact, in Edmondson's series, the body focus is mostly absent, reflecting that the main focal point is Black Widow's skills and work, and not her visual representation. Similarly, as the next section will explore, the choice of a black, non-descript costume does not add to focus on body image, but rather reduces the body to a tool utilized in service of Romanoff's far more exposed and explored wit and skill set.

### 3.5 Costume

In significant contrast to Wonder Woman and She-Hulk, Black Widow is not wearing the traditional swimsuit costume, but a suit more like the standard male superhero leotard. Because her superhero identity is not in contrast to her alter ego the same way that Wonder Woman, Superman or Batman's alter egos, who keep their identities a secret, Black Widow can wear her costume much more like a work outfit, with less of a need to change back into civilian clothes after finishing a job. The costume is a black one-piece suit that covers her body from ankles to neck, with long arms and a zipper all the way up front. As mentioned earlier, she has a belt with a red hourglass around the waist, and the rest of the belt is shaped like black circular shapes attached to each other, containing different kinds of weapons. She also has arsenals of weapons around her wrists that issue bullets and stings very similar to the deadly bite of the Black Widow spider. Aside from that, the costume fits her body tightly and perfectly, covering her modestly, and yet allows her to perform any movement and stunt without hindering her. As female superhero costumes go, Black Widow's costume is by far the most realistic one in terms of convincingly allowing movement and freedom.

**Black Widow's new costume fit her perfectly, in every sense.** Unlike the heroines of the previous 20 years, Black Widow was a thrill seeker who chose the life of a crime fighter for the excitement it brought her. She didn't do it to aid a boyfriend, didn't hide behind a wallflower alter ego, and lived her life with a freedom usually reserved for men. [...] **Black Widow's sexy costume defined her independent way of life and reflected the new**

**freedom that women were seeking in the 70's. Black Widow was unquestionably sexy, but, as with everything else in her life, it was on her terms.** (Madrid 156, my emphasis.)

Interestingly, though, as Madrid draws the comparison between Black Widow's costume and women's newfound freedom of the 1970's, Black Widow is still one of very few female superheroes not wearing a swimsuit costume even today, almost 50 years later.

A very similar replica of this costume has been used for Black Widow in the recent live-action Marvel movies. The costume fits very tightly to her body and reveals where there are muscles and where there are none, and the only difference between the suit from the comic books and the suit in the movies is that the one in the movies has been fitted with a cleavage as opposed to the original turtleneck, in order to affirm that Black Widow's attractiveness to the male audience. The suit is outfitted with weapons and helpful gadgets, and seems to stretch and allow mobility willingly and in a practical fashion, as is its real function.

Black Widow's costume is in marked contrast to both Wonder Woman and She-Hulk in several ways. First, its design is, as previously mentioned, much more

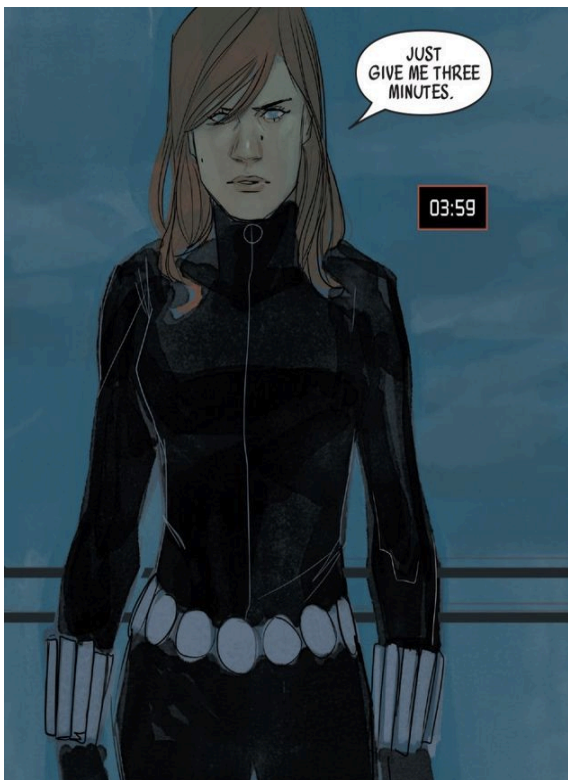


Figure 18: Comic book costume



Figure 19: Live-action costume

according to male standards of costume design within the genre than the traditional female costume worn by the other two female superheroes. This detail defines Black Widow as a more masculine character than Wonder Woman and She-Hulk. Secondly, the color of her suit is black and anonymous, whereas the other two wear white, purple, red, and blue, bright colors more traditionally associated with superheroes in general, but also a costume that above all promotes function –stealth- in stead of looks.

As with so much else, then, Black Widow has been bestowed a costume much like the one used for male superheroes, and gets to experience the freedom of movement and independence that comes with the benefits of being male in the superhero genre. As Madrid wrote: what she does, she does on her own terms, much like a man. This attitude is also the reason why she has maintained such a high standing with the Avengers for so many years, fighting alongside male superheroes as an equal, but only when it suits her, working another agenda on her own time.

### **3.6 Weapons/tools**

Black Widow's set of weapons and tools is a lot more complex than Wonder Woman's two traditional weapons, and includes her wide knowledge of martial arts and defense tactics, as well as languages and her skill set. In addition to this, her weapons are mostly attached to the costume, consisting of everything from knives, guns, bullets that fire without a gun (her "Widow's bite") and various helpful artifacts such as rope and a parachute, depending on the mission and situation. She prepares before a job, which means that she is not bound to any one weapon out of tradition, but dresses according to what she thinks she might need. This is untraditional for a superhero, but similar to the way that Batman arms himself, which might be the result of them both being ordinary humans without any superpowers. A hero with supernatural powers possesses the ability to adjust to the situation, and those superpowers will always be their most consistent and important weapon, whereas someone without any such powers will have to adjust their approach and equipment with each encounter with a new opponent.

It is also interesting to discuss the way that the weapons are attached to her costume, as they are all fitted closely to her body, probably to be within easy reach, and some of them, like the “Widow’s bite”, are designed to fire from her wrist without being unfastened and aimed first. Again, this weapon, in more than name, is a reference to the spider after which she has received her superhero title, and works quite similarly to the sting of the Black Widow spider. Like Batman, who chose the bat as a model, uses his cape and sonar system to resemble the natural abilities of the bat, Black Widow imitates the spider. Whereas the cape was traditionally assigned to the general male superhero to make him more of a “heroic figure”, in Batman’s case it serves two other functions, one of which is to resemble a bat, and give him the ability to fly, a skill he does not possess naturally. Being dependent upon his gadgets due to a lack of natural superpowers, these gadgets are a part of defining his identity, in much the same way that the powers of superheroes with supernatural abilities come to define their identities. Wonder Woman’s gadgets; the bullet-deflecting bracelets and truth-exposing lasso represent her non-violent morals and reluctance to hurt her enemies while still accomplishing her goals. She-Hulk’s superhuman strength and size reflects on her monstrosity and inclination to do what is necessary to be heard. Similarly, Black Widow’s stealthy weapons resemble the stings and poison of the Black Widow spider.

With regards to the discussion of phallic weapons versus non-phallic weapons, the most consistent of Black Widow’s weapons seem to be her wristbands with “Widow’s bite” as well as her gun, both within the category of phallic weapons. Her approach to the job as a spy and agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. is direct and ruthless in much the same way as her weapons, and this again falls closer to a masculine style of fighting, if there is such a category. Using phallic weapons becomes a representation of her identity as a female superhero adjusting to a male profession and challenging gender roles to such a degree that she is, from time to time, more successful than her male counterparts.

### 3.7 (Lack of) Token boyfriend

Wonder Woman reverses the Superman/Lois Lane binary with herself and Steve Trevor, and maintains a relationship with him that, according to Trina Robbins, permits her to be believable as a female character because a strong, female character without a male counterpart might be suspected of lesbian inclinations (Robbins). Robbins' theory does not, however, apply to Black Widow, who is preceded by Wonder Woman by a few decades, has never had a long-term relationship, and has not been subject to a fraction of the accusations of lesbian tendencies that Wonder Woman has had laid against her door. This is interesting, because one would reasonably expect a character such as Black Widow, who in many ways challenges gender roles by using a masculine approach to her profession, to be regarded as more of a threat to the patriarchy and therefore more easily be suspected of being a lesbian character. She even grew up in a home exclusively for girls, much like Wonder Woman's background from a matriarchal society that has been used as an argument for interpreting her as a lesbian. And yet, in my research for this thesis, though the number of sources about Wonder Woman was significantly larger, I never once came across an argument about Black Widow's sexuality, whereas Wonder Woman's sexuality seemed to be questioned in every second or third article about her. Why?

I have a theory that supports this. One factor is, of course, that Wonder Woman is a lot more popular than Black Widow, and with that popularity also comes more scrutiny with regards to character identity and sexuality. But in addition to this, Wonder Woman is more feminine than Black Widow, and after all, the monstrous-feminine is about hyper-femininity, and the essence of being a woman. Black Widow is not only made masculine, as I have argued, through comparison and character development, but she is also sterilized, and lacks the single most frightening part of the monstrous-feminine; the *vagina dentata*. The act of sterilization removed what the patriarchy finds threatening about woman, and makes her more masculine, and, in their opinion, a better soldier.

It is not entirely true that Black Widow has not had any romantic relationships, because she had, as previously mentioned, a brief romance with Daredevil whilst living in San Francisco for a time, but it did not last, and the concept of the token boyfriend is not valid if the boyfriend is a superhero, as that would make both parties equals. In

*Black Widow: The Tightly Tangled Web*, Black Widow runs into Daredevil on a mission in San Francisco, years after they parted ways, and he seems to be concerned with her work ethics, claiming that she no longer knows right from wrong. In doing so, he is also arguing for her to take more caution and a milder approach to her enemies, all in all reversing traditional gender roles that suggest that women should be “gentler” in their actions than men. Wonder Woman, for instance, is a strong supporter of being merciful and gentle even towards her enemies. Again, Black Widow assumes the part of the male, masculinizing her in relation to another male superhero that conversely becomes the female point of view.

Considering this, the only boyfriend of Black Widow’s has served to confirm her masculine traits, which should go further towards an interpretation of her being a lesbian, but I would argue quite the opposite; that a strengthened confidence and masculinity not only affirms a vital part of her identity as a superhero and as a character, but also that because this ruthlessness and masculinity are an important parts of her personality, it is difficult to separate what might be interpreted as sexuality from what is in fact her identity. I am not suggesting that sexuality and identity are not connected, and that one does not affect the other, but that the individuality and reluctance to connect with other people is inseparable from her identity and by its very nature rejects the possibility of *any* romantic relationship; heterosexual or otherwise. And while those characteristics are not entirely positive, the existence of a female character that is able to be strong and independent without a romantic male companion or an allegation of being homosexual, can absolutely be seen as a positive development.

### **3.8 Portrayal of women in Edmondson’s Black Widow series**

There are several female characters in the *Black Widow* series consisting of *Black Widow: The Finely Woven Thread*, *Black Widow: The Tightly Tangled Web* and *Black Widow: Last Days*. It is interesting to look at these in relation to Black Widow herself because they are also a representative of the portrayals and views of female characters



in superhero comic books in general. Perhaps the most frequent appearance is Maria Hill, Black Widow's supervisor in S.H.I.E.L.D., who is also sensibly dressed in a black body suit, with short, black hair and a slim, but not overly feminized body. She is in fact something so rare as a female leader of a spy circle and the team of superheroes known as the Avengers. As such, she is not required to maintain a superhero body, and while her physique seems more or less similar to Black Widow's, her appearances and the positions she is drawn in, suggests her rank as a secondary character, who should not draw attention to herself while the main character is in the same frame. As the two most important female characters in the comic book, both Maria Hill and Black Widow represent self-assured and accomplished women.

Besides Maria Hill, Black Widow requires the help of two other women; a jetsetter and informant called Tori Raven, and X-23, or Laura Kinney, who is a genetically manufactured clone of Wolverine, and is a female superhero originally belonging to the X-Men franchise. Tori Raven is a rich, independent woman living the life of a jetsetter while buying and selling favors and information. Black Widow uses her for information and help with locating her targets. She recruits the help of X-23 for one of her missions, and having the same biological structure as Wolverine, X-23 is able to get shot several times before getting back up and killing those who shot her. As Black Widow's character much resembles Batman's dark, stealthy and merciless style, X-23's identity owes much to Wolverine's raw, feral and indestructible anger. One common thing that separates these women from traditional superheroes such as Wonder Woman and Superman, that stands by a code of conduct which deters them from killing even their enemies (remember the reference to the reactions when Wonder Woman killed for the first time in 2005?) is that these women are not afraid to kill people in the line of duty. A ruthlessness previously associated with male superheroes such as Batman and Wolverine is visible in the way that Black Widow treats her enemies and those who stand in her way. But, also along the lines of Wolverine or Batman's morality, Black Widow maintains her status as a superhero fighting for justice and the redress of her victims by assuring that the people she kills or injures are villains beyond a doubt. Still, this brutality is once again more traditionally related to male superheroes than female, and as such Black Widow challenges gender expectations in this issue as well.



### 3.9 Live-action appearances

As mentioned, the surge of popularity for live-action movies based on comic books has led to a series of movie adaptations over the past ten years, beginning with *The X-Men* for Universal Studios in 2000 and *The Incredible Hulk* for Marvel in 2008. Since then a lot of superheroes from both the Marvel and DC universe has seen their own solo movie or TV-series, such as Batman, Superman, Iron Man, Spider Man, Daredevil, Captain America, Thor, Green Lantern, and until very recently only a single female superhero; Elektra. Some movie critics have suggested that the reason why no further solo movie adoptions of female superheroes has been attempted since, is that *Elektra* was a disaster at the Box Office. According to screenwriter John August, the reason that *Elektra* and other female superheroes fail is that: "Studios think all teenage boys are horny, and therefore want to see a beautiful girl kicking ass. But teenage boys are also kind of terrified of women, so the sexuality drives them away" (Schwartz 28). Recently, however, Supergirl has had success with her own TV-series on Netflix (2015-), whilst DC Entertainment together with Warner Brothers have decided to make an attempt at a solo Wonder Woman movie premiering spring 2017, after late productions of their other superhero movies have made great success. As supporting characters to male superheroes, though, a few female superheroes have had success, such as Wonder Woman, who is now getting her own movie, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch that have been given supporting roles in the Marvel's Avengers movies.

Black Widow makes her first appearance in *Iron Man 2* (2010), where she works as an undercover agent for S.H.I.E.L.D. in Tony Stark/Iron Man's company, until halfway through the movie when her identity is revealed. Typically, the first shot of her as Black Widow in costume, is cut closely from behind, only showing the small of her back, buttock and her upper thighs, covered in tight, black leather with weapons and ammunition strung around her waist and thighs with leather straps. The shot functions exclusively to introduce her not as a strong and independent superhero, but as a sexy female character, more or less the opposite of her comic book counterpart.

After that, however, she proceeds to make a fool of Stark's bodyguard as they fight their way into a building with guards, and she takes down ten of them while he struggles to fight a single one. In subsequent scenes as well as the following movies, she appears exactly the cold-blooded, independent agent that has already been established in the comic books. There is no mention of her project or her fund to atone for her past, and she is only addressed as Natasha Romanoff; never as Black Widow. In *The Avengers* (2012), she is briefly seen doing a private mission in Russia, beating a gang of Russian soldiers with a chair, wearing nothing but a black dress and nylons. This is, however, apart from her time undercover in *Iron Man 2*, one of only two times she is seen wearing a dress, the second is at a party in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and these are the most feminine outfits she wears throughout all her movie appearances. The rest of the time she is wearing her costume or civilian clothing consisting of jeans and a leather jacket, affirming the impression of a masculine individuality and style.

As with the section about female characters in the comic book series, there are also other female characters in the live-action features. One is Maria Hill, who appears in the comic book as well and is very similar to the character in the comics; independent and self-assured but discreet, even as a supporting character. Then there's Scarlet Witch, who is both psychic and telekinetic, or, in the words of Maria Hill in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*: "She's weird." A lot of female superheroes have been given so called non-physical superpowers such as being psychic, telekinetic or telepathic, like Jean Grey/the Phoenix and Ororo Munroe/Storm in the X-Men universe. Having powers like that allow them to participate in violent fights from a distance, and yet remain unruffled and sexy, whereas male superheroes will engage in physical combat and still appear powerful to young male readers. Scarlet Witch is such a superhero, and emerges from battle just as composed and collected as she was when the fight started. In contrast to this, Black Widow is once again the masculine counterpart, with only physical powers to sustain her, and engages her opponents directly even though it means that she will become dirty and less feminine in the process. The double standard here with regards to the sexes is significant. Wonder Woman's fighting style is also physical in that sense, but in relation to She-Hulk, who regularly rips her clothes apart and wreaks havoc around her enemies, Wonder Woman and Black Widow fall somewhere in between. Then again, not many male superheroes except for Hulk are as physical in a fight as She-Hulk, hence the monstrous imagery. This results in Black Widow, but also Wonder Woman to a degree,

becoming one of the most physical, and in extension the most masculine, female superheroes in terms of fighting styles and (super)powers.

Whereas Warner Brothers chose Israeli actress Gal Gadot for the role of Mediterranean/Greek Wonder Woman in the 2017 movie, Marvel cast American actress Scarlett Johansson as Black Widow for *Iron Man 2* and the subsequent movies, and gave her red hair and the occasional line in Russian to make the heritage of the character convincing. In terms of background, she mentions Russia and The Red Room in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and the sterilization process, after she had a flashback of the memory, and there is a brief recollection of her time before she joined S.H.I.E.L.D. in *The Avengers* (2012). As a supporting role, her background will not be explored to any significant degree, and she is again pushed towards the background as a character even though she is just as important to the Avengers as most of the male superheroes that have their own solo movies. There has been questions about whether a solo Black Widow movie is in the planning stages, but so far Marvel is still reluctant to produce solo features with female superheroes in a leading role, which might be the result of the previously mentioned *Elektra* movie.



Figure 20: Comic book appearance



Figure 21: Live-action appearance

### 3.10 Conclusion

Black Widow differs from other female superheroes in a number of ways, and, as this chapter has attempted to prove, occasionally has more in common with male superheroes rather than with her female counterparts. Using her Russian surname in its masculine form seems to be a signifier for the way in which she can be identified as a female acting with male tendencies. Her ruthless attitude towards spying on and killing people who “deserve it” stands with a clear contrast to Wonder Woman’s gentle philosophy of mercy and using her lasso to pry secrets and confessions from villains in stead of using force, and this disparity suggests a diverging sense of what a female superhero essentially is, if such an essence exists. Her background from an orphanage of girls and spider imagery referencing a species where the females are superior, all work together in enhancing the impression of her masculinity, rather than enforcing her feminine sides. If a scale were to be imagined, arranging female superheroes from the most feminine towards the most masculine, Black Widow would tilt further towards the masculine spectrum than She-Hulk, despite the large, monstrous body, for a number of reasons. These are her directness and agency in relationships with men, her use of phallic weapons, her ruthless inclination to kill villains rather than allow them repentance and imprisonment, and the enjoyment of her violent profession.

This attitude usually associated with male characters goes towards a conclusion that Black Widow, by applying a predominantly masculine profession and set of arms, challenges expectations for what female superheroes –or female comic book characters in general– are expected to act. In doing so, she does the opposite of what Cory Albertson accuses Wonder Woman of doing in *Batman v Superman*; the “patriarchal bargain” (Albertson 68, see also page 20 of this thesis), because she does not utilize her femininity for advantage. Nor does she represent a threat as the monstrous-feminine like She-Hulk, because in fact, the monstrous-feminine falls closer towards hyper-femininity than the threat of masculinity in a woman, and Black Widow does not express the feminine side of herself very often. Rather, she challenges gender roles and

goes against the assumption that as a woman she should behave a certain way. She confronts and competes with male superheroes on their own terms and with their own choice of weapons, and as a result becomes the true feminist icon as she proves their equal, and every now and again; superior.

This chapter has gone towards showing the differences between Black Widow and her counterparts Wonder Woman and She-Hulk, as well as other well-known female superheroes, and making an argument for how those differences are not opposed to a claim that Black Widow represents a healthy female character with the amount of individuality and agency that one would expect from a realistic portrayal of a female superhero, if such there is. The way that this is accomplished is by reversing gender roles and applying certain masculine traits to her character without also making those traits threatening or intimidating, which so often happens. By showing masculine traits, Black Widow avoids the stigma of becoming the monstrous-feminine and succeeds in appearing a self-governing and unique female superhero.

# Conclusion

As this thesis has attempted to prove, the representation of female superheroes in comic books are problematic in several ways. First, different standards apply to male and female superheroes, many of which are not in favor of the female characters. The portrayal of body images is exaggerated in terms of physical fitness, and male superheroes are drawn with superhuman muscles, often referred to within comics scholarship as hypermasculine. One of the reasons that this has become the standard for most male characters is that the performance of heavy physical acts expected from superheroes requires a believable physique with realistic muscle mass. For female superheroes, however, a *hyperfeminine* exterior has become the rule, and in contrast to the hypermasculine physique, the hyperfeminine body is not compatible with a realistic superhero muscle mass. The female superhero has exaggerated features associated with the feminine body, such as breasts and buttocks, with long, slim legs and a small waist, none of which represent a realistic physique for someone lifting cars or fighting monsters. Through the three chapters in this thesis, I have shown that the degree to which this hyperfemininity is expressed with each superhero depends much on the artist drawing each individual issue. Of the superheroes featured in this thesis, She-Hulk is the most “misrepresented” in this way, and sometimes to the degree that she becomes monstrous, whereas Wonder Woman is merely less muscular and more feminine than reasonably expected, and Black Widow appears almost desexualized compared to the other two and the norm, simply because she is neither hyperfeminine nor overly muscled. I have referred to this as a double standard within the genre, and it is not in favor of representing female characters in a realistic and healthy way. While the hypermasculinity in male superheroes has been accused of giving young male readers unhealthy expectations of their bodies, the comparison is not really valid, because, as argued by Aaron Taylor, the superpenis has been ignored rather than overly exposed, the way that the female hips and breasts have been exaggerated into a standard. In addition to this, the muscles of the male superhero serve a purpose, whereas the hyperfeminine body is not a prerequisite for the performance of superhuman acts.

Another important issue discussed in all three chapters is the costume of the female superhero, and the standards applied to male characters again signifies a double standard for gender roles within the superhero genre. While the male superhero in almost every case wear a leotard covering his body from neck down to the ankles, the female superhero wears a sexist swimsuit with a cleavage that reveals her exaggerated feminine features in varying degrees depending on the artist drawing the particular issue. The use of such costumes mirrors the predominantly male readership of superhero comic books, and McCloud's theory of reader identification, stating that each reader wishes to identify with the main character of the narrative, and in the case of superheroes, the male reader identifies with the male superhero. The female characters are, as a result of this, seen and portrayed as romantic interests or desires, which ultimately culminates in this divergence of standards with regards to gender roles.

Simone deBeauvoir expressed the difference between the sexes as a case of defining ones identity up against the other. Two contrasts can only ever be described in relation to each other, and so is the case with sex and gender. Beauvoir argues that this contrast between the male and female identity is understood from a viewpoint where the male identity represents the "original", so to say, whereas the female identity is understood to be the negative in the comparison, constituting a "lack" that the male identity defines itself up against. This is true also for the superhero gender roles, where the male superhero embodies the original, defines the imagery of the superhero and the expectations of what being a hero signifies. I have characterized this standard as "hard", in terms of the muscle mass, the moral code and the sentiments expressed by the majority of male superheroes. The comparison, therefore, the "lack" that the female superhero represents, is a "softer" approach, visible in both the feminine body image, the personal sentiments expressed by most female characters, as well as the vaginal choice of weapons. Each of the superheroes analyzed in this thesis represent different degrees of this softness. Wonder Woman, using only vaginal weapons, with a feminized body and a non-violent morality, embodies the true softness of the female character, and thus the lack against which the male superhero defines his harder identity. She-Hulk, abstaining from using weapons, but with no soft morality and a hyperfeminine, yet still monstrous body, falls in between the soft and the hard; between the male and female traditional gender roles. Finally, Black Widow expresses herself as "hard" and therefore male through the choice of weapons, body image, costume and morality, and

appears the masculine of the three. As such, I claim in summarizing this argument that Black Widow, in challenging the established gender roles of the genre emerges as a healthy female character with regards to genre conventions.

She-Hulk, on the other hand, exemplifies the unhealthy gender portrayal through body image, costume and behavior, and Chapter Two shows the ways in which the character is made to represent the abject and the monstrous-feminine and express the revolting fear of the female, both in contemporary society and in superhero gender conventions. The choice of using She-Hulk for this thesis was made to prove the problematic issues with gender roles in superhero comics, and explaining that this influences readers, male and female, of the comic books, leaving them with a misogynistic view of the female superhero and the female sex.

As the main argument of the study was to prove the need for a closer analysis of the genre with regards to female portrayal in general, and not exclusively the negative examples, Wonder Woman and Black Widow were chosen to exemplify the positive effects of healthy gender models, especially with regards to the small, but growing number of female readers, as mentioned with McCloud's term reader identification. These characters too have been accused of representing unhealthy values in terms of sexuality, which has been discussed in the corresponding chapters and will not be repeated here, but overall the analyses of each concluded with positive and interesting results, and in general they succeed in illuminating the issue in question, namely to increase an interest in further study of female superheroes.



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