



## Casting a Wider Lasso: An Analysis of the Cultural Dismissal of Wonder Woman Through Her 1975-1979 Television Series

By Ian Boucher

“Every successful show has a multitude of fights, and that the shows are successful sometimes are because of those fights. And sometimes shows aren’t successful because those fights aren’t carried on long or hard enough.”

-Douglas S. Cramer

“And any civilization that does not recognize the female is doomed to destruction. Women are the wave of the future—and sisterhood is...stronger than anything.”

-Wonder Woman, *The New Original Wonder Woman* (7 Nov. 1975)

### Abstract

Live-action superhero films currently play a significant role at the box office, which means they also play a significant role in culture’s understandings about justice. For the most part, however, superhero films are dominated by philosophies based in irrational fears and stereotypes, perpetuating an antiquated concept of justice that contributes detrimentally to societies around the world. Wonder Woman enriches the pantheon of superheroes by representing restorative justice, which is part of a more comprehensive approach to crime-fighting, in which mediators work with victims and offenders to try and overcome the roots of crimes and heal communities. This philosophy is merely one among many that could have a place in America’s considerations about justice, but it has not developed the same cultural awareness as the capture or murder of the majority of superheroes. This is partially because before 2017, the only time Wonder Woman was in the live-action spotlight was her 1975-1979 television series. Despite Wonder

Wonder Woman's publication in comic books since 1941, a commonly accepted sentiment is that her brand of justice is difficult for a superhero format. However, Wonder Woman's perceived difficulty has largely been the result of society's desire to suppress her over the course of her existence. From 1975-1979, the *Wonder Woman* live-action television series, also known as *The New Original Wonder Woman* and *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman*, gave the character's philosophy every reason to take off in the popular consciousness. An analysis of the series reveals a key stylistic link in the development of superhero adaptations between the *Batman* 1966-1968 television show and the 1978 *Superman* film that faithfully and clearly adapted Wonder Woman's philosophy into a mainstream 1970's television format. The series was suppressed, undone, and discredited, with the potential role of Wonder Woman as a figure of justice obscured by her sex, her gender, her feminism, and a perceived threat of sexuality, as part of Wonder Woman's larger impeded legacy in America's embedded culture of misogyny.

**Keywords:** Wonder Woman, superheroes, television, film, Superman, Batman, Lynda Carter, feminism, misogyny, sexuality, gender, sexism, comics, Patty Jenkins, restorative justice, 1970s, Amazons, Marston

## Introduction

Live-action superhero films currently play a significant role at the box office ("2017 Worldwide Grosses"), which means they also play a significant role in culture's understandings about justice. For the most part, however, superhero films are dominated by philosophies based in irrational fears and stereotypes, perpetuating an antiquated concept of justice that contributes detrimentally to societies around the world. Even if the superheroes of these films do not kill offenders, like the Punisher, or break their bones, like Batman, their main focus is on capture—once criminals are off the street, society's problems are solved, until the villains escape again. While the scholarly literature finds that capture is only part of the equation, and that more comprehensive measures are needed to resolve crime, the United States has prioritized politics over protection. America's dismissal of research-based solutions has been building a world focused on drug laws that have given the United States the highest incarcerated population in the world—not because these laws solve drug problems, or because Americans are especially terrible people, but because these laws have allowed politicians to get votes at the expense of people who are not considered white (Boucher).

Wonder Woman enriches the pantheon of superheroes by representing restorative justice, which is part of a more comprehensive approach to crime-fighting, in which mediators work with victims and offenders to try and overcome the roots of crimes and heal communities. This philosophy is merely one among many that could have a place in America's considerations about justice, but it has not developed the same level of cultural awareness as the capture or murder of the majority of superheroes. This is partially because before 2017, the only time Wonder Woman was in the live-action spotlight was her 1975-1979 television series. Despite Wonder Woman's publication in comic books since 1941, a commonly accepted sentiment is that her brand of justice is difficult for a superhero format (Boucher; Howell). Howell argues that in fact, Wonder Woman, as a feminist political cartoon integrated into a superhero universe, is "inherently disruptive to masculine superhero franchise branding," which "often seeks to minimize that which makes her character unique: her close ties to feminism, which are seen industrially as unmarketable, especially to male superhero fans" (143). Yockey refers to her origins as "antipatriarchal;" Wonder Woman's focus on love significantly differs from "the masculine-inflected affect that so commonly defines the superhero genre (the reactionary affects of fear, anger, and awe)" (Yockey "Wonder Woman"). Thus, Wonder Woman's perceived difficulty has largely been the result of

society's desire to suppress her over the course of her existence (Emad; Lepore). The character continues to be seen as a disruptive force in society, as the United Nations' decision to appoint her as a Goodwill Ambassador for women and girls was met with protests (McCann).

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## Comic Book

Wonder Woman was specifically developed to infuse love into the violence of traditional superhero justice. Drawing upon ideas from the literature of women's suffrage, William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman's primary creator, believed that women held more capacity for love than men, and that a society "ruled" by women would help realize a more peaceful world (Lepore Location 12375). Wonder Woman's early comics were concerned with "women fighting male dominance, cruelty, savagery and war-making with love control backed by force" (Lepore Location 5098). These comics were filled with imagery of bondage and liberation that represented an intricate dynamic in which the personal strengthened the societal (Lepore). These origins have largely been minimized over Wonder Woman's history since Marston's death in 1947; in the 1950s, stories began to focus on her super strength or romance with Steve Trevor, and in the 2010s Zeus became her father, displacing her original origin of being formed by her mother from clay without a man (Lepore Locations 5692, 5716, 5735, 9526; *Wonder Woman* Vol. 4 #3). Yet many of Wonder Woman's original elements have continued to inform the character's approach to justice. One of Wonder Woman's primary tools remains her Lasso of Truth, which forces people to not only tell the truth, but to also see the truth about themselves. In one of her early appearances, Wonder Woman supported the rehabilitation of Nazi spy Baroness Von Gunther (*Wonder Woman* Vol. 1 #3). In "Expatriate," she helped save a group of marauding aliens from destruction (*Wonder Woman* Vol. 3 #18-19). In a story where she takes over crime-fighting duties in Gotham City, her philosophy is epitomized when she tells another hero, "You don't fix a broken leg by scaring it, Oracle. It's time to try the splint over the sword" (*Sensation Comics Featuring Wonder Woman* Vol. 1 #2).

This philosophy was present in Wonder Woman's comics immediately preceding the 1975-1979 television series. In *Wonder Woman* Vol. 1 #213, she uses her lasso to force a pacifist and a career criminal to help her, and both citizens ultimately work together to use the lasso to help save Wonder Woman from a robot. "Irony, isn't it," the Flash narrates, "a *violent criminal* and a devout *pacifist* both rallying to a common cause when the moment of truth came..." (18). The style of these issues would greatly reflect the television series to come. In #212, to rescue a female prime minister from the Cavalier, a villain who manipulates women to do his bidding through pheromones, Wonder Woman changes into her costume by twirling her lasso around her. She bursts through a wall, supposedly at the behest of her "friend," alter ego Diana Prince, uses her prehensile lasso, and turns her tiara into a boomerang. She subsequently gets a job at the United Nations Crisis Bureau. In the show, Wonder Woman would twirl to change into her costume, burst into many rooms at the supposed behest of Diana Prince, fight misogynistic,

manipulative villains with a prehensile lasso and boomerang tiara, and get a job as an agent at a government organization. And of course, both the comics and the television show were full of her bullet-deflecting bracelets.

## Television

The *Wonder Woman* television series brought this comics style to the screen, and was a step forward in complexity from the campy, lighthearted *Batman* television series. Much like the ideals core to Wonder Woman herself, the series brought audiences closer to the current expectation of human drama within the hyperbole of superheroes by grounding a tongue-in-cheek atmosphere with an earnest, empathetic protagonist. The pilot movie, aired on November 7, 1975, introduces a theme song featuring animated art in the style of a comic book. Wonder Woman leaps off a building, uses her lasso, stops a car, pilots her invisible plane, and frees her comic book sidekick Steve Trevor, herself, and others from bondage. The lyrics, set to upbeat 1970s trumpets, include, "Make a hawk a dove, stop a war with love, make a liar tell the truth...Stop a bullet cold, make the Axis fold, change their minds, and change the world!"

The first season included comic book narration blocks and supporting comedic guests such as actor Henry Gibson, and followed a lighthearted structure of Diana Prince/Wonder Woman (Lynda Carter) and Steve Trevor (Lyle Waggoner) being assigned missions at the U.S. War Department in a simple World War II setting, juxtaposed with comedy relief from Diana's other comic book sidekick, Etta Candy (Beatrice Colen). But within this style, the show clearly integrated Wonder Woman's identity. There was her super strength, her Lasso of Truth, her bullet-deflecting bracelets, a Paradise Island governed by a "sisterhood" of Amazons who overcame slavery in Rome and Greece to become more advanced than Western society, and a respectful, professional Steve Trevor who supported the story. Most importantly, it was centered around Carter's earnest portrayal of a script preaching peace and goodwill.

Several of the episodes in the first season have ridiculous premises, but the show explored them in ways that were quintessentially Wonder Woman. In "Wonder Woman Meets Baroness Von Gunther," the Baroness from the comics is a Nazi incarcerated in the United States conspiring with guards and a steel magnate heading a congressional committee, and at the end of the episode, Wonder Woman tells her, "It looks as if you're going to have more time to read about democracy, Baroness. Lucky you find it so fascinating. Perhaps now you'll appreciate it and learn from your unwomanly mistakes." Later, Diana and Steve have the following exchange:

Diana: Well I certainly hope that the Baroness realizes freedom and democracy are the only causes worthy of her intelligence...

Steve: Diana, your understanding and compassion are amazing. You really do believe that people can learn to change for the better.

Diana: Yes. Where I was raised we were taught that...good must triumph over evil, and that women, and men, can learn.

In "Fausta: The Nazi Wonder Woman," Diana inspires a female Nazi agent to join the Allies. In "Wonder Woman vs. Gargantua!" Wonder Woman helps rehabilitate an enhanced gorilla manipulated by Nazi agents. It is a surprisingly compassionate episode, in which Diana is constantly concerned with the gorilla's health, putting her hand through the gorilla's cage, and ultimately telling him that, "You mustn't hurt anyone," not even his oppressor. Even Steve becomes interested in the gorilla's welfare,

and Wonder Woman replies, "It's just a little kindness and tenderness and love that transcends those barriers with animals. And with people." When the gorilla is returned to the circus, Wonder Woman returns him to the jungle. In "The Pluto File," she helps a scientist solve an equation to stop an artificial earthquake, created by a villain whom Wonder Woman prompts to reveal that his coldness originated from learning not to rely on others. She responds to him that "it's never too late to change." The two-parter "Judgement from Outer Space" follows a plot very similar to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), in which an alien is tasked with finding out whether Earth is worth saving. Although Diana tells the alien that she is a protector of the planet, and from a society that lives "together. In harmony. With our living Earth," she must nevertheless confront whether she should be using force to stop a war. In "Formula 407," a man does not listen to her protests against his sexual advances, asking, "But how can romance ever be the wrong idea?" to which Diana replies, "When there's only one person with it on their mind. I believe you have a phrase here in Argentina, it takes two to tango?" She then overtly addresses the issue by stating, "The W.A.V.E. training manual is quite explicit on its instructions on the handling of unwarranted attentions." When her assailant says, "But what do instruction manuals know? I bet there's not one chapter on Argentine gentlemen," Diana responds, "If you keep this up there's going to be one."

At first, Season 2 stayed true to this identity of responding to violence with the strength of love, often revealing human pain underneath. The season was also less tongue-in-cheek and more within the style of a 1970s crime adventure series. The setting was brought into the 1970s, with Diana returning to Western society—along with Steve's identical son—to fight more nuanced battles, not as a secretary, but as an "associate" before becoming a full agent. In "Anschluss '77," Wonder Woman deflects projectiles and stops a tank in its tracks, but also confronts Nazis still active in South America trying to resurrect Hitler. As the clone shouts to his followers, Wonder Woman remembers the horrors of World War II with a montage of real footage. In the next episode, "The Man Who Could Move the World," Wonder Woman confronts the revenge of a telekinetic Japanese man who was held in an American internment camp during World War II, where there was no law, "only military oppression of my people." The man tears down the former camp around them with intense closeups. Even though Wonder Woman only acknowledges so much wrongdoing on the part of mainstream society, she takes off her bracelets and belt, the sources of her powers, to find the root of the man's pain, and reunites him with the family he thought he lost.

In "Knockout," Wonder Woman confronts a female police officer turned violent revolutionary. When Wonder Woman acts as a mediator between the revolutionary and police, the revolutionary says, "I'm not afraid of you, do you understand that?" to which Wonder Woman replies, "I've never wanted you to be afraid of me." The former officer relents, saying, "At least it's ended," to which Wonder Woman returns, "At least it's begun." Diana later states to her superiors that "any jury will understand" the former police officer's choice to turn from a life of violence. In "The Pied Paper," when Wonder Woman finally captures in her lasso a truly sinister brainwashing musician similar to the comics' Cavalier, rather than simply taking him away, she says, "You were given a gift, the ability to make people happy with your music. Instead you took that gift and used it to make children steal for you." Eventually, she removes the lasso, her voice gets quieter, and she finds the root of his actions as a disgruntled musician in debt. She ultimately finds a role for him to work on his rehabilitation, and considers with Steve the possibility of a judge ordering "a psychiatric observation period." The audience goes from hoping Wonder Woman takes down a supervillain to being surprised with a thought-provoking reflection that helps the situation move forward. Wonder Woman does not simply capture the criminal, but talks about his crimes with him and his victim, as well as with the authorities as her citizen self, Diana Prince. These elements continued to combine 1970's superhero action with Wonder Woman's philosophy of justice.

Unfortunately, the second season ultimately minimized Wonder Woman's identity in favor of a more generic adventure show. There were less feminist statements. The lyrics in the theme song were removed. The show seemed to replace its substance with what it thought was popular. After *Star Wars* (1977) became a phenomenon, not only did Wonder Woman fight a gas-masked alien in a cape, but the season introduced a dome-headed robot for comic relief. Most disconcertingly, although Diana did at times continue to demonstrate her signature traits, as when she calms dogs in "Light-Fingered Lady," she started consistently talking, as she does in that episode, about putting criminals "away for life and throw[ing] away the key." In "The Murderous Missile," after a seemingly injured motorcyclist double-crosses Diana by stealing her car, Diana is visibly angry when she says harshly, "Thanks a lot," with her hands on her hips. At times in the show, Diana Prince would pretend to be more alarmed than she actually was, but after this particular thief departs, she continues to display this emotion. It could be argued that her expression of anger differentiates her from the countless female characters who suppress their anger, but the purpose of Wonder Woman, in both the original comics and the early show, was love and compassion. Anger is the easy, superhero status quo, and Wonder Woman has proven time and again that she can express her own philosophy just as strongly. Throughout the series, Wonder Woman approached adversity with unwavering strength. However, over time, her compassionate appeals, the trait for which she was created to elevate her from the majority of the superhero pantheon, decreased. Season 3 continued this trend. Diana Prince became more sardonic, not as concerned with healing the causes of criminals' actions as with catching them. In "The Girl with a Gift for Disaster," her first thought upon hearing about a plotted blackout is that it "could cause riots and looting." It could be argued that the character grew world-weary in her dealings with human society, but the point of the character is that she is already more advanced.

Although Diana's philosophy was watered down compared to the first season, the final season did bring it out more than the second, and was able to find a style that more consistently utilized many elements intrinsic to the character. In "Disco Devil," when a man tries to dance with Wonder Woman, saying, "Hey, I don't recognize the word 'No,'" she replies, "Well uh, maybe it's time you started," before shoving him away. The season also pushed how the genre could reflect society through the many gray areas in which Wonder Woman found herself. In "Going, Going, Gone," Diana voices her interest to a Soviet agent in overcoming the hurdles facing their governments to focus on their citizens. In "Time Bomb," the time-traveling villain is sent to a futuristic board of governors for rehabilitation, and the time-traveling hero sends back Diana's handcuffs. In "Formicida," the namesake villain, a woman who essentially gets the same powers as Marvel's Ant-Man, tries to stop the head of a corporation from knowingly releasing a pesticide that would destroy the environment. Formicida takes responsibility for her crimes, and is the one to tell her former colleague, who is also remorseful for his own culpability, to "Save it for the judge." Wonder Woman lovingly uses her lasso to help Formicida forget, move on, and start over. In "The Deadly Dolphin," a man training a dolphin for criminal enterprises protests against his associates when he becomes aware of their intentions to blow up an oil tanker that would kill the dolphin, people on the tanker, and wildlife, and his probation advocated for by both Wonder Woman and the court is to care for and help "un-train" the dolphin at a water park. In "The Boy Who Knew Her Secret," alien invaders who at first glance appear to be taking over human bodies turn out to be doing so only temporarily to catch the real alien villain.

In "Stolen Faces," a woman with a criminal record is hired by thieves to impersonate Wonder Woman, reasoning that "they figured anybody desperate enough to break the law once wouldn't mind doing it again." Diana tells her that "Those people who hired you, they want you to think that just because you made some bad decisions once, that you don't know how to make good ones." At the end of the episode, what the villains don't count on is that, in the words of one of the woman's friends, "A police record doesn't make a person all bad." In "Time Bomb," a villain references that Wonder Woman's lasso "isn't

worth a dime in court;" in "Skateboard Wiz," Diana acknowledges that "Testimony by magic lasso isn't exactly admissible in court." All the while, Wonder Woman still gets to bend guns, lasso helicopters back to the ground, and lead with love. Wonder Woman worked with young people throughout the series, but Season 3 more than any other featured Wonder Woman empowering kids and teens. Season 3's identity comes together in the Scooby Doo-sounding two-parter finale, "The Phantom of the Roller Coaster," an episode about a missing in action Vietnam veteran and a teenage roller coaster enthusiast who get caught up in a domestic surveillance plot by "the biggest espionage ring in the country" to sell wiretapped information; as Steve says, "foreign countries are gonna know more about our government than we do." A sign reading "Watergate Mall" also appears briefly. In the process, the teenager learns to transform his interests into career goals, and the veteran finds a way to reconnect with society.

## Contemporary Response

*Wonder Woman* began as a popular show. Its pilot premiered "well" ("Weekly Rating Scorecard" 38), on Friday at 8:00 pm Eastern Standard Time alongside the likes of *Sanford and Son*, *The Rockford Files*, and *M\*A\*S\*H*, with some newspapers objectively listing its premise as "The heroine of the popular 1940's comic books, saves the life of a U.S. Air Force officer," and others including the language of "beautiful" (Appendix: North Carolina Television Schedule Sources). Its first season did not have a set time, but at least one of its early episodes earned a positive Nielsen response (Sharbutt; New York News; "Wonder Woman Kayos Bob Hope!"), and its first season was part of ABC's "most successful calendar year" in the network's history at that point (Kenion "ABC Adds" B9). Despite its moves across days, and eventually networks after being acquired by CBS for its second and third seasons, it consistently aired at 8:00 or 8:30 against the likes of *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, *Good Times*, and before *Baretta*, *Starsky and Hutch*, or *Charlie's Angels*. During its final season, it settled into Fridays at 8:00, after *The Muppet Show* and before *The Incredible Hulk* or *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and against shows like *Happy Days* and *Diff'rent Strokes* (Appendix: North Carolina Television Schedule Sources).

While Lynda Carter claimed that in the first year, it was "a very in thing" to be guest-starring on the show, and Douglas S. Cramer, the original producer of the series, said he "could seldom go to dinner party or movie opening without someone saying 'I really love *Wonder Woman*, can you write me a heavy?'" (*Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*), it was dropped by ABC and replaced by *Blansky's Beauties* and *Fish* (Brown 22 Jan. 1977). After its initial season at CBS (Kenion "New Shows;" New York Times News Service), it became one of only four out of 14 new series to continue on that network for the following year of 1978-1979 ("Networks Intensify"). It would eventually outlast both *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* ("Ratings Zonked"), and was used as one of the network's "established hits" to support the new show *The Dukes of Hazzard* (Brown 6 Dec. 1978). Yet the second and third seasons had very poor ratings (Brown 21 Sept. 1977; Kenion "ABC in the Lead"; Kenion "ABC's Old;" Morrison). By the end of 1978, CBS shifted its focus to comedies (Brown 6 Dec. 1978). CBS ultimately dropped both *Wonder Woman* after three seasons (two on its network) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* after two, purportedly to avoid "an overload" of comic book programming on the network, keeping *The Incredible Hulk*, which ran for another three seasons and three television movies (Brown 14 May 1979 17).

Carter was a vocal supporter of feminism, portraying Wonder Woman as "very much a woman with feeling" (Pike 12), and speaking about beauty pageants and the Equal Rights Amendment (Beck 7 Nov. 1975; Christy). Cramer claimed to have received letters from girls and women who "never thought I

could have a life like that, and, I've thought about going into the service, or writing to the FBI, or thinking that there are all these jobs out there and all those things that I could do with my life that I never thought were possible. I mean to me, that was one of the most exciting things about the show" (*Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*). This author as of yet has not found contemporary pieces analyzing Wonder Woman's philosophy of justice in the series.

While children's Saturday morning cartoons at the time were full of superheroes (Marguiles), there was also a great deal of anti-superhero sentiment (Cleghorn; Beck 24 July 1978; Dunkley; O'Connor: 25 Jan. 1976, 4 Nov. 1977, 31 Mar. 1978, 17 Dec. 1978). Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* wrote about a recent trend of "dumb" television, categorizing *Wonder Woman* as a "strictly nonthink" show part of a dominance of "foolish, proudly witless escapism" (A4). Violence in television was under fire, and *Wonder Woman* repeatedly ranked on lists of violent programs (Associated Press "ABC Ranked"; Associated Press "Group Says" National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting; UPI).

Although *Variety* saw superhero shows as superficial entertainment, it framed the camp, gadgets, and sets of *Batman* in positive language; it actually became involved in the sets, "scientific hocus-pocus," and performances of *The Incredible Hulk*; and it wrote about *The Amazing Spider-Man* that "Comic books provide perfect kid-vid-action shows, and the 90-minute 'Spiderman' [sic] pilot was a good example of the genre...generally treating the story with professional respect," complimenting the physical appearance of the male lead (Demp 42; Mick 62; Pit 47). Wonder Woman was part of the zeitgeist, frequently referenced with other superheroes such as Superman, the Hulk, and Spider-Man (Buck; "Names and Faces;" "The State Pride"), and was considered one of "the top trio in comics" ("Comic-Book Heroes" B1). Several articles communicated the character's identity in clear and objective ways ("ABC Slates;" "Comic Book Heroine Lives!" & "Gangly Girl").

Yet critics seemed to be as shocked by Wonder Woman as the crowd in the pilot which follows her as she first walks down an American city street in full costume. While *Variety* complimented Carter's earnestness in the second season's premiere and wrote that the show was likely to give CBS its best Friday lead-in of several seasons ("Wonder Woman"), *Wonder Woman* was considered worse than other superheroes. Numerous contemporary writers focused on Wonder Woman's physical appearance and sexuality. *Variety* used "bovine" and "lumpen" to describe Carter in the show's premiere, and described the premise of the character as "silly" without seeming to realize the comic book history or purpose, calling Batman "classic theatre by comparison," and only complimenting Lyle Waggoner's physical appearance as "a Saturday matinee serial star" (Bill 45). One writer called the show "sex-oriented" (Deeb "Sex on TV" 13A) and "pure cheesecake...exploiting sex" (Deeb "TV Makes Sex" 7B). Another writer, ignorant of Wonder Woman's origins, fixated on it as "weekly titillation" (Nobile). Even a more neutral article chronicling comic book history mentioned that Carter's depiction was "less modestly attired" than Wonder Woman's original comic book debut, while praising Batman's "remarkable television career" ("Comic-Book Heroes" B1). One critic for the *New York Times*, who was particularly against superheroes, routinely used sexist language to disparage *Wonder Woman*, with such statements as, "As an actress, Miss Carter creates the impression of a sweet little girl disconcertingly trapped in the body of a potential Fellini sexuality symbol" (O'Connor 19 Sept. 1977). Numerous other writers focused on Carter's physical appearance while being positive (Alridge; "Gangly Girl;" Kleiner; O'Connor 2 Oct. 1977; Scott "Ego").

Criticisms about sexuality were despite the fact that Wonder Woman was rarely depicted in a romantic interaction on the show. There are occasional beats of a romantic tone, mainly involving Diana and the first Steve Trevor expressing hints of their feelings, but Diana never pursues a romantic interaction or relationship. Wonder Woman is focused on her work as a superhero. The most overt situation is in the



second season when she resists the advances of an evil robot Steve Jr., with the implication being that the real Steve would never do that. Critics made the series sound like the famous beach-running sequences on *Baywatch*, but when the Amazons compete in the pilot, the frame focuses on their athletic feats. One writer interviewed in an article offered seemingly fair criticisms that the series had “no characterization” and “no personality” (Associated Press “Read It” A6), but for a series under so much cultural pressure, this could hardly be a surprise.

Behind the scenes, producer Douglas S. Cramer has said that he connected to Wonder Woman through the work of Gloria Steinem, whom he considered to have defined the character as much as Marston and created “a challenge and a reason to do this show” (Carter and Cramer). “[I]nfluenced by *Batman* and its success,” Cramer wanted to utilize humor to make the series more fun than other real-life adventures on television, and in a direct step from the 1960s *Batman* series, he hired *Batman* writer Stanley Ralph Ross to develop the pilot (Carter and Cramer; FoundationINTERVIEWS; “Stanley Ralph Ross”). Carter bought everything she could on Wonder Woman, and said that she chose “to play her absolutely for real...and [Diana] wasn’t very impressed with her own abilities because all of her sisters on Paradise Island could do the same thing” (Carter and Cramer; *Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*). Carter stated that “I wanted to approach this character in a way that women in particular...were never threatened by her, by her body, what she was wearing or not wearing” (*Wonder Woman: The Ultimate Feminist Icon*). There was an element of intended sex appeal—although Cramer thought the flash of light used for Diana’s transformation later in the series was more effective, he also called the original transformation spin a “striptease,” and noted how the network wanted Steve’s shirt off on Paradise Island. But Carter “really wasn’t thinking about being sexy...this was the ban the bra time, this was sexual freedom time.” She was somewhat uncomfortable with what she referred to as her “bullet breasts” top in the first season (Carter and Cramer; *Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*). In the pilot, a general also refers to the costume as a “uniform.”

Carter said that those in power on the production “were afraid of casting...any female in a leading role,” and both Carter and Cramer reflected that leading roles for women in television at the time were rare, including for work behind the scenes (*Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*; Carter and Cramer). Cramer had many conversations with the network, where many men were concerned that the show was going too far with some of the feminist statements, and Cramer reflected that he was “very glad we said it all...and went too far in some people’s eyes” (Carter and Cramer). At the time, Shull referred to a fear at ABC of “super-women” leads in 1976 (“TV Mailbag”). This was all in spite of the significant role of women in the American marketplace, in relation to Wonder Woman or otherwise (Berlatsky; Carter; Emad; United States). In her audio commentary for the Season 3 DVD, Carter said:

The one thing that I regret in the present day Wonder Woman [referring to Seasons 2 and 3] was that they lost some of the feminism, particularly because it was such an era of feminism, and I think the networks were afraid that we would lose viewers if it was too feminist, and I really wish that, as we did in the first season, that we had had a stronger feminist message, and that they had trusted me enough to realize that Wonder Woman could say feminist things and still be for women and not against men.

Thus, it is clear that the *Wonder Woman* live-action television series was suppressed and undone in favor of a perceived mainstream America afraid of feminism. But the undoing of the series did not end there.

## Superhero Legacy

There continue to be negative reflections about the series. In his book *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics, 1941-1948*, Berlatsky dismisses the show as “terminally dull” —the back of the book reads that the television series was “far different” from the original comics—implying that, by not analyzing the show in greater detail, he considers the series “completely aesthetically and intellectually worthless” (187). Berlatsky writes that most versions of Wonder Woman do not “engage with Marston’s themes; they don’t build on his ideas; they don’t reference or incorporate or think about Peter’s art. They’re about Wonder Woman the icon, but they don’t have much, or anything, to do with Marston/Peter’s comics” (214). Others reflecting on the show have focused negatively on Wonder Woman’s costume (Weaver).

There are many positive reflections as well, primarily about Wonder Woman’s role as a strong female character (Smith; Weinberger). The series resonated a great deal with young people who grew up to become comics creators. Alex Ross, Phil Jimenez, Adam Hughes, and Andy Mangels have emphasized that the show was accurate to the comics, that Lynda Carter “became” the character, and that they “bought her instantly.” They saw her for the ideals she represented, and as a superhero brought to life (*Revolutionizing a Classic*). According to Ross:

Here’s this woman, a very gorgeous woman running around half-naked essentially wearing pretty much a swimming outfit, and somehow, she comes across as not being ultra-sexual, that in fact, she is this symbol to young women, or...women of any age, as not being defiled by that exposure. Essentially, the character was taken as what the character’s meant to be, as an object of energy and motion, not as of corrupted sexuality, or something that is just for the boys. (*Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*)

Andy Mangels has said that “Other than Christopher Reeve, there has never been a single actor who has so embodied a comic book character as Lynda Carter did; she was the epitome of everything Wonder Woman was in the comics and everything that fans of Wonder Woman wanted the character to be” (*Revolutionizing a Classic*). Alex Ross stated that Carter is of “near equal importance to the legend of Wonder Woman...as the creators.” He also said that “there is really only one Wonder Woman to anybody’s eyes” (*Beauty, Brawn, and Bulletproof Bracelets*). What these interviews did not appear to emphasize or explore, however, is that at the time, there literally was only one successful live-action Wonder Woman. Hughes even attributed the character’s inherent qualities of gentleness and peace to Lynda Carter’s portrayal (*Revolutionizing a Classic*). Although these interviews were part of promotional DVD retrospectives, the footage that was released reflected an emphasis in comics circles that Lynda Carter was the only Wonder Woman, rather than questions about why she was the only Wonder Woman, or why the qualities of the character have not been more present in American culture.

More than scholars, fans, and creators, one must look up in the sky. In the middle of *Wonder Woman*’s final season, the Christopher Reeve *Superman* film was released to the joy of many critics, who praised it for many of the same reasons their colleagues disparaged *Wonder Woman*. *Variety* wrote that it was “a wonderful, chuckling, preposterously exciting fantasy,” stating that the filmmakers “did it: they brought this cherished and durable comic book character to the screen,” implying that, unlike previous superhero adaptations, the world had been hoping for this. *Variety* praised the film’s “laughs,” and was able to “adjust” to how “most of the plot elements are completely absurd” (Harwood).

Particularly interesting is the contemporary emphasis on the sexual dynamic between Superman and Lois Lane, relishing the sexual euphoria of Lois Lane toward Superman, and the Man of Steel’s confident response. *Variety* wrote that “her initial double-entendre interview with Superman is wickedly coy, dancing round the obvious question any red-blooded girl might ask herself about such a magnificent prospect.” About the nighttime tryst across the clouds of Metropolis, the author wrote, “The women are going to love it.” The *Washington Post* similarly praised this midnight flight as “an elegant erotic reverie,”

and savored Reeve's "upper hand" of the situation, dubbing him "a young actor at once handsome and astute enough to rationalize the preposterous fancy of a comic-book superhero in the flesh" (Arnold). The *Globe and Mail* wrote that Reeve's Superman was "the man who is more of a man than most men dare to be...He's a romantic. Margot Kidder's cracklingly contemporary Lois Lane finds that she is, too—she eulogizes her conquest as he takes her for a convincing nighttime spin over Manhattan/Metropolis...Even Lex Luthor's grounded moll falls for him" (Scott "Superman"). The *New York Daily News*, in a review notably written by a woman but with several striking similarities to *Time*'s article on the film, cited Lois as evidence of the film's "cheerful attempt to update" the Superman mythos:

Lois Lane, played with great zest by Margot Kidder, is not the prim spinster of the '30s, but a spirited, stubbornly independent woman who owns her own seduction pad (with a terrace, yet). But as liberated as she obviously is, she is transformed into a gushing, blushing schoolgirl at the sight of Superman. Not that this is surprising because Superman himself has been transformed into a sex object with slightly rumpled hair who can even melt the heart of Luthor's buxom moll (Valerie Perrine) who tells him regretfully, "Why is it I can't get it on with good guys?" And Christopher Reeve plays Superman with such sexy self-assurance (he plays Kent just as well, showing his complete lack of self-assurance) and such good-natured humor that no red-blooded American woman could resist him. (Carroll)

Despite the centrality of these elements whose mere hint was considered so reprehensible in *Wonder Woman*, the *Washington Post* dubbed the film "terrific juvenile entertainment"; the *Globe and Mail* wrote that "Superman makes you feel like a child again;" the *New York Daily News* called it "pure escape and good, clean, unadulterated fun;" and even the less euphoric *Time* wrote that, "Not since Star Wars, the alltime champ, has there been such an entertaining movie for children of all ages" (Arnold; Carroll; "Here Comes Superman!!!!"; Scott "Superman").

Yet while the *Washington Post* review mentions *Superman*'s flying opening credits, the *Globe and Mail* mentions the black and white opening, and *Time* mentions a reminder of the *Batman* television series, none of these reviews compare the *Wonder Woman* pilot's similar opening soaring star trails, its black and white expositional newsreel, its connections to *Batman*, its earnest hero surrounded by tongue-in-cheek villains, or its transition from the fantastical setting of the protagonist's heritage to the cool color palette and period style of the real world.

Shortly after *Superman*'s success, when a *New York Times* piece reported film studios' pursuit of comics properties, the article also claimed that superheroes were an inherent part of culture (Beller). *Time*'s *Superman* review framed the film as responsibly adapting almost "mythological" icons—icons now with fans apparently ("Here Comes Superman!!!!"). But when the character of *Wonder Woman* has referenced and built on pop culture, critics have continued to jump at the opportunity to point it out, whether lambasting the "Gargantua" episode being released before the first remake of *King Kong* (1976), or praising *Superman*'s influence over 2017's *Wonder Woman* (O'Connor 17 Dec. 1976; Scott "Review"; Tobias). *Superman* appears to be a savior of superhero adaptations arriving as suddenly as the Man of Steel into Metropolis's headlines, elevated by an overt sexual dynamic that was fixated upon and framed as central to the film's merits. But while *Superman* did influence 2017's *Wonder Woman* (Davis), no adaptation happens in a vacuum, and no superhero is an island—1975's *Wonder Woman* also influenced *Superman*. *Wonder Woman* played her own distinct, crucial role in the evolution of superhero adaptations, but was dismissed due to a perceived sexual threat that was fixated upon and applied to her simply by virtue of her existence, in a television series that largely kept romance at the peripheral.

As a character, Wonder Woman has clearly endured, from a powerful example of “linking the individual consumer-citizen to the public sphere via the affective commodity object,” as Yockey writes about Andy Mangels’s use of Wonder Woman Day to support victims of domestic violence, to the success of the 2017 film (Hughes). But as Yockey writes, while the Wonder Woman show appeared in “the early to mid-1970s,” “perhaps the most prominent period of mainstream feminist visibility,” Wonder Woman as a character has been additionally concluded by Robbins to be “threatening to heterosexual men...not only is she physically powerful, but she also chooses to use her powers in nonviolent ways. Thus Wonder Woman herself literally and figuratively contains the aggression of patriarchal authority.” The suppression of the series is part of a very tangible suppression of women in American society, both consciously and subconsciously. The response to the television show was influenced by a “rise of market segmentation” in which Wonder Woman could be used both by *Ms. Magazine* and suppressed by “the corporate gatekeepers of hegemonic values” (Yockey “Wonder Woman”). Emad refers to “discourses of danger surrounding the women’s movement in the 1970s,” writing, “While the movement appropriates Wonder Woman as a powerful symbol of feminist strength and possibility, DC Comics’ own representations of Wonder Woman during this time often depicted her as too powerful...Female power is depicted as a menace to society” (968). This cultural perception has been as embedded in the American superhero genre as in any other part of society. Yockey writes that during the 1960s *Batman* television show, “Mainstream news coverage of feminism in this period typically reduced the movement to narratives about the breaking of boundaries, rather than a consideration of what motivated such ‘transgressions’” (Yockey 56). In *Batman*, “Masculine authority always retains an advantage over female agency” (Yockey 52). “Commissioner Gordon and Batman regulate female sexuality, a function they ritualistically carry out in their constant recontainment of Catwoman. Consistent with the super-hero genre’s repression of sex, sexuality is exclusively both female and criminal. As a conservative antidote, Batgirl is necessarily asexual” (Yockey 50). As for Superman, Lynda Carter, responding to the Wonder Woman United Nations backlash, pointed out, “Superman had a skintight outfit that showed every little ripple, didn’t he? Doesn’t he have a great big bulge in his crotch? Hello!” (Williams). Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, who had a close relationship with the Marstons, came to this conclusion long before the *Wonder Woman* television series, or this essay for that matter. In 1955, when she discovered that Wonder Woman remained on *Parents’ Magazine*’s list of objectionable comics even after being watered down, she wrote to the magazine that Wonder Woman “is now a character which is active in the ways that Superman is active—which you do approve of” (Lepore Location 9524).

On the basis of genre style, the restorative justice of *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979) could have taken off to join the philosophies of Batman and Superman in enriching the collective superhero pantheon long before *Wonder Woman* (2017), which came 38 years later, much longer than any gap between Superman and Batman’s live-action adaptations. This is especially striking when one considers the centrality of love to any character’s longevity in fandom (Yockey “Wonder Woman”). Lynda Carter’s Wonder Woman was seen as threatening because she existed—not just as a woman or a superwoman, but as a superwoman epitomizing particular ideals. The series was suppressed, undone (not necessarily in its lifespan in comparison to other shows at the time, but in its identity), and after that, discredited, with the cultural role of Wonder Woman as a figure of justice obscured by her sex, her gender, her feminism, and a perceived threat of sexuality, in contrast to the euphoric dominant sexuality of *Superman* (1978). The treatment and continued perception of this show has contributed a critical role in the lack of presence of Wonder Woman’s philosophy of justice in American culture. Since its conclusion, language about the

series has not focused on the philosophy its lead character represented or the significance of how that philosophy was represented in a television format, obscuring how *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979) played its own distinct, crucial role in the evolution of superhero adaptations.

This character's cultural legacy continues to be impeded by misogynistic cultural mores, as society still contends with her costume—Lynda Carter also responded to the United Nations backlash that “It’s the ultimate sexist thing to say that’s all you can see, when you think about Wonder Woman, all you can think about is a sex object” (Williams)—and female superheroes are still headlines. Writers such as Berlatsky acknowledge that culturally, “Wonder Woman the icon is just another female superhero with a few slightly unusual quirks,” but contribute to the collective ignorance about her history by taking the television series for granted (215). As Emad writes, “The symbol of Wonder Woman loses cultural capital in the broader imagined community where she—and the women’s movement—are perceived as a threat” (968). And as Yockey writes, “That the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified only confirms the ongoing need to promote a combination of progressive feminist politics and Marston’s vision of matriarchal authority for all” (Yockey “Wonder Woman”). In a country governed by politics over protection, the suppression of Wonder Woman’s ideals has suppressed a philosophy that American culture would do well to cast further lassos in analyzing, learning from, and integrating into its stories about justice, whether in comics, films, or television.

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